

UNIVERSITÉ DU QUÉBEC À MONTRÉAL

*BREAKING A MONTRÉAL:*  
ETHNOGRAPHIE D'UNE DANSE DE RUE HIP HOP

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LYS STEVENS

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BREAKING ACROSS LINES:  
AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF A MONTREAL HIP HOP STREET DANCE

THESIS  
PRESENTED  
AS PARTIAL REQUIREMENT  
OF A MASTERS IN DANCE

BY  
LYS STEVENS

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iii
LIST OF DIAGRAMS .....	x
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS .....	x
ABSTRACT IN FRENCH (RÉSUMÉ) .....	xi
ENGLISH ABSTRACT .....	xiii
1. QUESTION AND METHODOLOGY .....	1
1.1 Introduction .....	1
1.2 The research question .....	1
1.2.1 Objective and limits of study .....	1
1.2.2 Definition of terms .....	5
1.2.3 Research question .....	9
1.2.4 Secondary research questions .....	9
1.3 Methodology .....	10
1.3.1 Type of research: Cultural Studies .....	10
1.3.2 Research approaches: ethnography.....	12
1.3.3 Case studies and interviews .....	16
1.3.4 The contained and extended dance event .....	18
1.4 Literature survey .....	19
1.4.1 Breaking and hip hop culture .....	20
1.4.2 African American vernacular dance .....	25
1.4.3 Academic framework .....	28
1.5 Theoretical groundings .....	33
1.5.1 Aesthetic ideology .....	33
1.5.2 Reproducibility .....	35

1.5.3	Transmission .....	39
1.5.4	Consciousness .....	41
1.6	Chapter conclusion .....	42
2.	HISTORICAL CONTEXT: THE EVOLUTION OF BREAKING .....	44
2.1	Introduction .....	44
2.2	The emergence of hip hop .....	45
2.2.1	Socio-cultural context .....	45
2.2.2	Youth subculture .....	46
2.2.3	Graffiti first .....	48
2.2.4	The DJ innovates: The Trinity .....	49
2.2.5	The MC raps .....	51
2.2.6	Breaking .....	52
2.3	Excavating the roots of breaking .....	53
2.3.1	African and Afro-American social dance influences .....	53
2.3.2	James Brown .....	56
2.3.3	<i>Soul Train's</i> Funk Styles .....	57
2.3.4	Mass Media's influence .....	61
2.4	Breaking in New York City .....	63
2.4.1	Rocking .....	63
2.4.2	Breaking: Puerto Ricans innovate .....	65
2.4.3	The downtown scene .....	69
2.4.4	Breaking on screen .....	73
2.4.5	Academics criticize .....	75
2.4.6	Going global .....	78
2.5	Breaking in Montreal .....	82
2.5.1	Breaking hits Montreal: the early 1980s .....	82
2.5.2	The winter of breaking .....	87
2.5.3	The resurgence: Tactical and Flow Rock crews .....	89
2.5.4	More established: breaking today .....	94

2.5.5	Across borders: the artistic frame .....	97
2.6	Chapter conclusion .....	99
3.	VERNACULAR BREAKING .....	100
3.1	Introduction .....	100
3.2	Who .....	101
3.2.1	Dance-makers .....	101
3.2.2	Dancing participants .....	102
3.2.3	Non-dancing participants .....	107
3.3	What .....	109
3.3.1	Aesthetics of vernacular breaking .....	110
3.3.2	The improvisational form .....	112
3.3.3	Structure .....	114
3.3.4	Dialogic relationships .....	117
3.3.5	Composition in breaking .....	119
3.4	Where .....	121
3.4.1	Skills development .....	121
3.4.2	Circle cypher .....	123
3.4.3	Official competition .....	127
3.4.4	Freestyle and showcase performances .....	130
3.5	When .....	133
3.6	Why .....	134
3.7	Chapter conclusion .....	137
4.	CONTEMPORARY DANCE BREAK FUSIONS .....	138
4.1	Introduction .....	138
4.2	Who .....	138
4.2.1	Dance-makers .....	138
4.2.2	Dancing participants .....	144
4.2.3	Non-dancing participants .....	146
4.3	What .....	147



4.3.1	Aesthetics in breaking performances	147
4.3.2	Form	154
4.4	Where	158
4.4.1	The studio	158
4.4.2	The theatre	159
4.4.3	Alternate spaces	161
4.5	When	162
4.6	Why	164
4.6.1	The choreographers' motivations	164
4.6.2	The presenters' motivations	167
4.6.3	The spectators' motivations	168
4.7	Chapter conclusion	169
5.	DISCUSSION	170
5.1	Introduction: cultural change	170
5.2	Degrees of participation	172
5.2.1	Circle cypher	174
5.2.2	Official battle	176
5.2.3	Freestyle and showcase shows	177
5.2.4	Contemporary dance fusion performances	177
5.3	Techniques of translocation	178
5.3.1	Three principles of theatricalization	178
5.3.2	Theatricalization principles in breaking	180
5.3.3	Third principle choreographies: <i>RBDG</i> and <i>Solid State</i>	182
5.4	Socio-political dimension: race and power	183
5.4.1	Commodification and mis-representation	184
5.4.2	Institutional recognition and patronage	186
5.5	Chapter conclusion	190
6.	CONCLUSION	192
	Appendix A: Essay by author, 2006	195

Appendix B: Article by author, 2004 .....	205
Appendix C: Case Study: <i>Flow Rock</i> crew .....	210
Appendix D: Case Study: <i>Rubberbandance Group</i> .....	213
Appendix E: Case Study: <i>Solid State Breakdance Collective</i> .....	215
Appendix F: Sample interview questions (choreographer) .....	217
Appendix G: List of interviews .....	219
Appendix H: Consent forms of interviewees .....	221
Appendix I: Event analysis model .....	228
Appendix J: List of dance events formally analyzed .....	230
Appendix K: Montreal breaking timeline .....	233
Appendix L: Performance review by author, 2007 .....	238
REFERENCES .....	243
LEXICON .....	256

## LIST OF DIAGRAMS

Figure 2.1: Breaking's genealogy

Figure 5.1: Breaking's participatory/presentational axis

Figure 5.1: Breaking's structural/improvisatory axis

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

*BJM – Les Ballets Jazz de Montréal*

*CDN – Côte-des-Neiges*

*DFS – Dysfunkshun crew*

*DRC – Down Rock Complex*

*E5 – Ellementale-5*

*FTBA – Free Translation by Author*

*LGBC – Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal*

*MAI – Montréal, arts interculturel*

*NCC – Negro Community Centre*

*NDA – Définition non applicable*

*NDG – Notre Dame de Grâce*

*Not You – It's not you... It's me...*

*RBDG – Rubberbandance Group*

*RSC – Rock Steady crew*

*SAT – Société des Arts Technologiques*

*Solid State – Solid State Breakdance Collective*

*YMCA – Young Men's Community Association*

## RÉSUMÉ

La présente recherche est une étude ethnographique d'une danse de rue hip-hop appelée « breaking » (communément appelée « breakdance ») à Montréal dans ses divers contextes et occurrences. En particulier, elle vise à déterminer les changements esthétiques et socio-culturels qui se manifestent lorsque le contexte social ou vernaculaire du «breaking» est reconfiguré en œuvre de danse contemporaine.

Un examen historique de la forme de danse encadre l'exploration du «breaking» dans quatre contextes précis : le « freestyle cypher, » le « battle » organisé, la mise en vedette « freestyle » et le spectacle de danse contemporaine. Le transfert ou le glissement de contexte de la danse se décline en plusieurs niveaux : les participants (qui), l'esthétique et la forme (quoi), le lieu (où), la relation au temps (quand) et la raison d'être (pourquoi). Ces cinq catégories d'examen sont empruntées de la *Theory and Methods for an Anthropological Study of Dance* de l'anthropologue de danse américaine Joann Kealiinohomoku.

La compréhension du transfert de la danse en divers contextes est inspirée par des modèles théoriques d'études en danses folkloriques. Le «freestyle cypher» reflète le contexte original participatif de la danse folklorique, souvent désignée comme première manifestation de danse. Les contextes subséquents suivent approximativement les trois principes de théâtralisation adaptés par le folkloriste canadien Andrij Nahachewsky lui-même inspiré du folkloriste ukrainien Kim Vasylenko. Selon ces principes, différents niveaux ou approches d'adaptation de la danse folklorique au théâtre sont appliqués à la danse d'origine. Le dernier principe rejoint l'approche de chorégraphes en danse contemporaine qui fusionnent le vocabulaire et l'esthétique du «breakdance» avec ceux de la danse contemporaine et du ballet. Ce processus est démontré dans une recherche sur le travail de deux compagnies de danse montréalaises, *Rubberbandance Group* sous la direction de Victor Quijada et *Solid State Breakdance Collective* sous la direction d'un groupe de chorégraphes-interprètes féminines.

Les ramifications socio-culturelles d'un tel transfert sont complexes, surtout dans le milieu des arts de la scène. Le glissement, notamment d'un art populaire ou d'une danse vernaculaire, au « High Art » sous-tend une reconnaissance et un soutien institutionnels. Les divisions de la reconnaissance et le soutien se font souvent selon

les ethnies. Néanmoins, les formes de danse non-occidentales réussissent, depuis quelques années, à infiltrer la danse contemporaine. Le «breaking», bien qu'elle soit une forme de danse née en Occident, illustre cela. Elle a été créée par de jeunes noirs et hispanophones du Bronx, un quartier défavorisé de New York, avant d'être largement assimilée par de jeunes Canadiens d'origines ethniques semblables, aussi issus de milieux défavorisés. Le travail de *Rubberbandance Groupe* et celui de *Solid State Breakdance Collective* questionnent les hiérarchies et se jouent des catégories.

Mots clés:

Breaking (b-boying/b-girling)  
Danse vernaculaire Africaine Américaine  
Danse contemporaine  
Danse de représentation  
Danse de participation  
Appropriation  
Hip hop

## ABSTRACT

This research is an ethnographic study of the hip hop street dance called 'breaking' (commonly called 'breakdance') in Montreal through its various manifestations and contexts. Specifically, it asks what aesthetic and socio-cultural changes occur when breaking in a social or vernacular context is reconfigured as presentational contemporary dance works.

Following a historical survey of the dance form, breaking is explored through four specific contexts: the freestyle cypher, the organized battle, the freestyle showcase and the contemporary dance performance. This translocation of the dance, or shift in its context affects the dance on several levels: its participants (who), its aesthetics and form (what), its location (where), its relationship to time (when) and its *raison d'être* (why). These five categories of consideration are borrowed from American Dance Anthropologist Joann Kealiinohomoku's *Theory and Methods for an Anthropological Study of Dance*.

In understanding this translocation of the dance through various contexts, the use of theoretical models in folk dance studies has been instructive. The freestyle cypher parallels the original, participatory context of a folk dance, often called a dance in its first existence. The subsequent contexts fall roughly along the lines of Canadian folklorist Andriy Nahachewsky's adaptation of Ukrainian dance scholar Kim Vasylenko's three principles of theatricalization, where different levels or approaches to the adaptation of a folk dance to a theatrical stage are applied to the original dance. The final 'principle' or level matches the approach of contemporary dance choreographers who fuse breaking dance vocabulary and aesthetics with contemporary dance and ballet. This process is demonstrated in the research through the work of two Montreal dance companies, *Rubberbandance Group* directed by Victor Quijada and *Solid State Breakdance Collective* directed by a group of female dancer/choreographers.

The socio-cultural ramifications of such a translocation, particularly to the performing arts context are complex. This shift, particularly the shift from a perceived 'low' art or what I have called vernacular dance form to a 'high' art implicates institutional recognition and patronage. Such divisions often fall along racial lines, although in more recent years the contemporary dance has been successfully infiltrated by non-western forms. Breaking, although a dance form born in the West, is one such example, as it was created by black and Latino youth from

the economically-deprived neighbourhood of the Bronx, New York, and largely appropriated by similarly racially-mixed and lower-income youth in Canada. The work of *Rubberbandance Group* and *Solid State Breakdance Collective* demonstrate an intriguing confounding of categorical hierarchies.

Key words:

Breaking (b-boying/b-girling)  
African American vernacular dance  
Contemporary dance  
Presentational dance  
Participatory dance  
Appropriation  
Hip hop

## CHAPTER 1

### QUESTION AND METHODOLOGY

#### **1.1 Introduction**

This research that began in the fall of 2003 was prompted by a peripheral association with the hip hop dance community in Montreal when I was the co-host of a weekly radio show on dance. I observed the tensions surrounding the digression between breaking in a vernacular or street dance context and in a performing arts context. I became fascinated by the power of the categorical hierarchy between high and low art and its ability to still carry weight in our cultural institutions and social relations. I realized that our traditional notions of art in the West, filtered down into generally unchallenged common assumptions, have proven to be inadequate when attempting theoretical bridges between economic classes and differing cultures. This is the departure point for this research.

#### **1.2 The research question**

##### **1.2.1 Objective and limits of study**

###### **1.2.1.1 Objectives**

The objective of my research is to question the creation of 'fusion' work in Contemporary dance, specifically in regards to cultural forms. In a broad sense this is an investigation into the process of cultural change. The specificities of this study are located in the particular realities of the dance called 'breaking', as it exists in Montreal, both in its vernacular (or un-institutional) and stage forms. Breaking is one of the many dance forms associated with the transnational subculture of hip hop. My



interest lies in the aesthetic and cultural issues underlying the contested divisions of 'high' and 'low' art. A careful critique of these divisions becomes necessary when one investigates the transgression of a dance form from one stratum to another.

Breaking is a unique dance form with a relatively recent history, having emerged around the early 1970s as a cornerstone to the four major elements of hip hop culture: graffiti, DJ music, rap lyrics and breaking, the original dance of hip hop culture. According to Rose (1994, p.21-23), this new culture (and by extension the dance) was a result of convergent forces fusing traditions of African American expressive culture with the more immediate realities of post-industrial poverty, and the inventive reconfiguring of fragments drawn from diverse cultural and technological images in mass media. Soon after its crystallization as a fixed dance form, it was propelled, in a very short time, from relative isolation within the nexus of Bronx youth culture, to world exposure, roughly over the course of four years, from 1979 to 1983. While the dance continues to exist in its vernacular context fully embedded in a subaltern culture of hip hop, today it is accessible to non-initiates, in however distorted form, in music videos through mass media vehicles of cable network television stations such as the American MTV and Black Entertainment Television (BET), the English-Canada MuchMusic, the French-Canada MusiquePlus, in televised commercials, and in big-budget movies of the teen dance genre, as well as through studio hip hop dance classes, as common today as was Jazz Ballet in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It has also, in very recent years, made significant appearances in the 'high art' context of contemporary dance stages.

Unique as the dance form of breaking is, this last mentioned process of change from 'low' to 'high' art itself is not unusual, and can be seen through several artistic disciplines and styles. A broad example would be the traditional crafts movement and its incorporation as a legitimate visual art, studied in institutes of higher learning and presented in galleries. There is also the example of the appropriation of what was black-originated music forms such as jazz, ragtime and blues music by white musicians, and its subsequent institutional validation. Similarly in dance, we can see

the apparition of ‘Negro’ or ‘black’ dance in the 1930s, in part a conscious ‘concertization’ of African, Afro-Caribbean and African American ritual or social dances in this case by both African and Caucasian Americans. The evolution of Classical Ballet itself, with its roots in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, can be understood as a transformation, codification and institutionalization of European folk dances and court dances.

The dance form of breaking has undergone a similar transformation. In Montreal it’s vernacular community is vibrant, as well it is an identifier for a few local young contemporary dance companies, such as *Destins croisés*, *Rubberbandance Group*<sup>1</sup> and *Solid State Breakdance Collective*<sup>2</sup>. The latter two serve as case studies for this investigation. The fact that breaking originally comes from a lower-income minority community forces the discussion around ‘high’ and ‘low’ art to include issues of race and class. These are issues that I consider to be of importance in the relating of art and cultural production to the wider social world. I should note here that while my involvement in the contemporary dance community is extensive, I cannot claim any significant personal investment in the breaking community prior to this study. In this sense I am very much an outsider looking (respectfully) in.

#### 1.2.1.2 Limits

Although this phenomenon is common, perhaps even an inevitable progression of culture, academic studies from which I may have modelled the current research are not. Because the culture in question is not highly structured and at times even difficult to locate, there were many additional difficulties encountered in the course of the research of my subject. As explained more thoroughly throughout this chapter, reliable written documents on breaking are limited, and data collected in my field study was at times conflicting, reflecting the variable points of view, histories and

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter referred to simply as *RBDG*.

<sup>2</sup> Hereafter referred to simply as *Solid State*.

vocabulary used in this culture. Such conflicting information is only natural in such an amorphous, living culture without prescriptive hierarchies.

I began this research with the intention of incorporating a broader scope – that of all dances associated with hip hop culture; specifically those termed ‘street dance’ styles<sup>3</sup>. While these other dances (Locking, Popping, etc.) are no longer central to the study, they are part and parcel of the story of breaking’s evolution, and to ignore any mention of them would be to create a false picture. Many breakers are at the very least familiar with, if not proficient, in other hip hop street dance forms, and the various dances often occur at the same events. The contemporary ‘breakdance’ collective *Solid State* in particular use House<sup>4</sup> and Swing dance vocabulary in their choreography, and in increasing amounts, while their base is still essentially a fusion of breaking and contemporary dance.

This study is equally limited to a very particular evolution of breaking over time, which is geographically specific – that is, the Montreal breaking scene. Hip hop and breaking is now world-wide, with very vibrant communities in Japan and Korea, across Europe, Africa and even into the Pacific regions. In several of these countries a similar phenomenon of what I call the ‘translocation’ of the vernacular breaking to the contemporary dance stage has also occurred. France took the lead in this, producing several dance companies based on breaking or hip hop dance vocabulary, such as *Black Blanc Beur* (formed in 1984) and *Käfig* (1996), with Belgium following with the company *Hush Hush Hush* (formed in 1995). The USA also produced professional dance companies such as Ronald K. Brown’s *Evidence* (formed in 1985) and *Rennie Harris Pure Movement* (formed in 1992). In England, b-boy Jonzi D has been choreographing since 1998. In Montreal *Solid State* formed in 2000 and *Destins croisés* and Victor Quijada’s *RBDG* both formed in 2002, although to my knowledge similar companies have not formed in other regions of Canada. The

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<sup>3</sup> See section 1.2.2.2 for more information.

<sup>4</sup> See the lexicon at the end of this paper for more information on House dance.

process by which breaking entered, evolved, and expressed, holds similarities and significant differences in each of these locations. A comparative study of breaking in these countries would be a very interesting investigation, but one that is beyond the scope of this thesis.

### 1.2.2 Definition of terms

Problematic terms in relation to this study are multiple and require clarification. I will begin with two key terms that are used within the dance culture of breaking itself. Terminology in breaking subculture is in flux and geographically localized. Because of its non-institutionalized nature, there is no one definitive authority on terminology. In the Montreal breaking community there is a general consensus, however, on the use and meaning of certain words, and in this paper I have prioritized this local usage<sup>5</sup>.

Following that I will address the term 'contemporary dance', another term defined by its common usage rather than any particular objective authority.

I will then address academic terms that I have used in order to clarify distinctions broader than the particularities of the communities of breaking and contemporary dance. Academic terminology however is not always neutral, but in fact tends to reflect a Western 'high art' bias. Joann Kealiinohomoku exposed the problematic nature of academic dance terminology in her article "An anthropologist looks at ballet as a form of ethnic dance" (1983) written in 1970. Reprinted several times since and cited repeatedly, this article alerted dance scholars to inherited ethnocentrism built into dance language and categorizations<sup>6</sup>. Kealiinohomoku dissected terms such as 'ethnic', 'primitive' and 'folk dance' to reveal their

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<sup>5</sup> A lexicon is available at the end of the paper to define specific terms.

<sup>6</sup> Most notably the essay was reprinted thirteen years later in Roger Copeland and Marshall Cohen's anthology *What is dance? Readings in theory and criticism* (1983), although according to Theresa J. Buckland (1999, p.9, Notes) the article has been repeatedly reprinted. It has also been translated into French in *Danse nomade, Nouvelles de danse* (no. 34-35, 1998). The number of times I have seen this article

misconceived assumptions based on distanced, 'armchair' anthropology and racist stereotyping. I have waded through the murky waters of terminology to find the most neutral and descriptive words possible.

### **1.2.2.1 Breaking**

Following purists within the Montreal breaking community, I favour the term 'breaking' throughout this study rather than the derived 'breakdance,' more commonly used by those outside of the community. Breaking is considered by practitioners to be the exact term to describe the dance, and is used interchangeably along with 'b-boying', which I have opted to avoid for the most part, due to its gendered nature. A dancer of the form is therefore a 'breaker', a 'b-boy' or a 'b-girl'.

It must also be clarified that breaking is not hip hop dance, although it is a dance in hip hop culture. Hip hop dance is a term used to describe a dance style that is often used in music videos. It is a style that incorporates elements of jazz dance, breaking and other street dance forms (notably elements of popping) and is often performed in very precise choreographies using group unison.

### **1.2.2.2 Street dance**

'Street dance' is a term used frequently in the breaking community. It is essentially a term used to refer to the raw, non-institutionalized dances of America, primarily those evolving from African American communities. Therefore Hoofing is considered a street dance whereas Tap dance is considered its institutionalized or appropriated incarnation. Breaking, locking, popping and house dance are among some of the more visible street dances in Montreal. The conjuring up of the concrete playground of inner-city slums is significant, for the dances have been built out of the creativity of those with little. However the majority of street dances were initially

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referred to is considerable, but to cite only a few: Fraleigh (1999, p.6); Desmond (2000, p.44); Buckland (1999, p.4); Frosch (1999, p.253).

developed in dancehalls or nightclubs and not on city streets, as the name suggests. Breaking might be the only significant exception, as the following chapter on breaking's historical context will explain. The categorization and histories of street dance forms, styles and steps deserve a study unto itself.

### 1.2.2.3 Contemporary dance

The term 'contemporary dance' is problematic because its literal significance should include any dance contemporary to the current day. One might think it would include any dance forms created in the last 40-odd years, therefore putting both breaking and choreography in the same category. In fact, at least within the arts community in Montreal, the term refers strictly to dance pieces created in the post-modern art context.

In her doctoral thesis, *Illuminating Luna: An ethnographic study of meaning in a Montréal 'nouvelle danse' event*, which examines a dance piece by O' Vertigo choreographer Ginette Laurin, Dena Davida opts instead for the expression 'nouvelle danse'. However she recognizes that the term contemporary dance is more wide spread and the validation of the term is in the collective understanding of its meaning, at least within that community. Contemporary dance creation can be considered 'art' because it is recognized as such by those that participate in its production, "other artists, peer juries, funding bodies, audiences, presenters and dance writers and researchers" (Davida 2007, p.40-41).

In the context of the present study, the term 'contemporary dance' refers to both artistic dance creation for the proscenium stage and taking part in established networks of the art world (e.g. dance presenters and arts funding). Contemporary dance fusions are therefore works that incorporate movement vocabulary from outside sources. In the case of this study, the outside dance source I am referring to is breaking, but contemporary dance fusions occur with a multitude other forms such as tango, jig, and flamenco.

#### 1.2.2.4 Elite dance and vernacular dance

I have found no adequately unbiased term grouping the triumvirate of Western elite dance forms comprised of Ballet, Modern and Contemporary dance. To call them 'theatrical' dance forms in order to refer to their common manifestation in theatres confuses them with interdisciplinary dance-theatre creation. To call them 'concert' or 'concertized' dance forms confuses them with music performances. As this study will expose, the division is more subtle and complex than a division simply based on physical location. To call them 'high-art' dance forms reifies the hierarchy I wish to question. I favour the term 'dance in performing arts contexts' where space allows. For economy's sake I will occasionally use the term 'elite dance'.

Similarly, it has been difficult to find an adequate term to describe breaking in its street or community context. Is breaking a popular dance, a social dance or a folk dance? I have found no clear consensus as to the meaning of each of these terms. Scholar Juan Flores tracks the history of the shifting meaning of popular culture, considering the introduction of mass media significant in the transition from folklore to mass culture:

Mediated culture *for* the people came to eclipse and replace, in most theoretical assessments, the expressive culture *of* the people which had been the object of knowledge of popular culture and folklore studies in earlier generations. ... This narrative of the effective replacement of popular cultures by mass culture became common sense, such that by our times any discussion of traditional, community-based cultural experience has come to be regarded as a sign of romantic nostalgia which flies in the face of contemporary realities (emphasis in the original, 2000, p.18).

According to Friedland, folk and popular dance are subsets of vernacular dance, which is defined by being common to "a group of people who, through shared experience, become a dance community" (1998, p.32). It is difficult to determine whether breaking is definitely either a 'folk' or a 'popular' dance, as there does not seem to be a clear articulation of the distinction between the two categories in these writings. It is clear, at least, that breaking in its original, vernacular context can be analyzed using many of the same observations of folklorists, as if it were a folk



dance. So while I will not call breaking a 'folk dance', I will make many references to it as if it were one.

Vernacular dance, therefore becomes a very useful term, grouping all kinds of non-elite dances, whether they occur in rural peasant settings, on urban streets, in groups, in pairs or in solo form with a supporting circle of onlookers. Vernacular dance is a term coined by Marshall and Jean Stearns in their groundbreaking *Jazz dance: The story of American vernacular dance* published in 1968, and used extensively thereafter to refer specifically to African American vernacular dances, in particular by Kealiinohomoku (1972), Friedland (1983, 1995, 1998), and Jackson (2001). I use the term 'vernacular dance' or 'dance in vernacular contexts' to refer to breaking as it exists in its community setting.

#### **1.2.2.5 Translocation**

Because there is not a lot of literature in dance on cultural change, I was compelled to coin my own word in order to describe the movement of a given dance from one context to another. The word translocation is derived from the Latin root 'trans' meaning 'across' and the word 'location'. Therefore it describes dances across locations – vernacular dances in both vernacular and performing arts contexts.

#### **1.2.3 Research question**

What aesthetic and socio-cultural changes occur when vernacular breaking is reconfigured as presentational contemporary dance works in Montreal?

#### **1.2.4 Secondary research questions**

- a) What distinguishes breaking in a vernacular context from presentation contemporary dance works according to participants, time, space and form?
- b) What processes are undergone in order to achieve this translocation?
- c) What aesthetic and socio-cultural elements are lost and what new elements are potentially gained in this transition?



### 1.3 Methodology

#### 1.3.1 Type of research: Cultural Studies

My research belongs in the larger discipline of Cultural Studies, in which Dance Studies (or Cultural Studies of Dance, or Critical Dance Studies) is an emerging sub-discipline. It is an interdisciplinary field devoted to examining relations of culture and power. Cultural Studies directly address questions of representation, ideology, hegemony, commodification and difference in gender, race and ethnicity (Barker 2000, p.7). Cultural criticism of this nature urges an analysis of dance as a cultural production, whose “political and ideological messages [are] conveyed both through the subject matter ... and in its choreographic form. ... Cultural studies also advocate reexamination of traditional boundaries between functions ascribed to dance genres classified as ‘high’ art or ‘popular’ culture” (Foster 1998, p.378).

The study of popular culture is inextricable from this research, particularly in the legacy created by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS)<sup>7</sup>. According to Helen Thomas this school of study initially focused on the analysis of ‘deviant’ youth subcultures, later broadening to incorporate a textual analysis of style in subcultures (2003, p.65-66). Dick Hebdige’s 1979 *Subculture: the meaning of style*, analysis of British punk culture from which many parallels could be made in hip hop culture, is a pivotal work to the present study.

As an interdisciplinary field, Cultural Studies is closely related to other disciplines in the social sciences. The research I have undertaken relies heavily on parallel disciplines such as Dance Anthropology, Ethnochoreology, and to a lesser degree on Performance Studies. Dance Anthropology has moved in recent years closer to the interests in Cultural Studies, while holding the specificities of dance central. Dance Anthropology asserts that body and movement are socially constructed; that there are mutual influences between dance and larger social

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<sup>7</sup> University of Birmingham, England (1964-2002).

patterns; and that for both dance practitioners and spectators, dance constitutes an interplay of ideas, techniques and institutions. Dance Anthropologist Cynthia Novack states:

Culture is embodied. A primary means of understanding, knowing, making sense of the world comes through shared experiences society offers us. Movement constitutes an ever-present reality in which we constantly participate. We perform movement, invent it, interpret it, and reinterpret it, on conscious and unconscious levels. In these actions, we participate in and reinforce culture, and we also create it (1990, p.6).

While there do exist several interesting parallels between my research framework and Performance Studies, there are also significant differences. Performance Studies link the performing arts with non-art activity cross-culturally. However, in the merging of interest in theatre and Anthropology, dance is still left as a poor second cousin. More importantly, the focus in Performance Studies on the performance of everyday actions, including all kinds of ceremony and speech itself makes for too broad a comparison, as my study is confined to the enactment of movement which is culturally understood as dance.

Ethnochoreology is promoted through the International Council on Traditional Music (ICTM) and their Studygroup on Ethnochoreology, which has held an biannual Symposium since the early 1980s<sup>8</sup>. Its adherents are Eastern European folk dance specialists and Dance Anthropologists. Ethnochoreologists often look at dance in a social context that changes over time, often to a presentational context.

It was a revelation when I discovered that there was a direct correlation between these seemingly divergent streams of study. According to Marvin Carlson, "Folklore studies has been one of the areas of Anthropology and Cultural Studies that has contributed most significantly to modern concepts of performance study" (1996, p.15). Carlson also notes that William H. Jansen, in his "Classifying Performance in the Study of Verbal Folklore" (1957) was one of first theorists to suggest a

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<sup>8</sup> Founded in 1947 in London, England, the ICTM Secretariat is currently located in the University of Canberra, Australia.

classification model with performance and participation as two ends of a spectrum, a key axis explored in the present study.

### **1.3.2 Research approaches: ethnography**

Barker (2000) identifies three key methodologies in cultural studies: ethnography, textual approaches, and reception studies. My approach has been heavily weighted in ethnography and ethnohistory, with some textual analysis. According to Jane Desmond, “most of the theoretical vigour of dance studies in the last decade has not come from its engagement with ‘ethnography,’ but from poststructural or textual approaches which “investigate representational practices (literary texts, films, fashion, music, advertisements, theatrical events, among others)” (2000, p.43-44). Desmond’s article is a call to draw on the rich possibilities that the methodology of ethnography or fieldwork can offer to Dance and Cultural Studies.

I am drawn to ethnography because of its prioritizing of the voices and perspectives of the cultural agents directly involved with the activity in question. Deirdre Sklar asserts that the sole use of textual approaches, treating cultural objects and phenomenon as ‘texts’ to be ‘read’, does not suffice in the analysis of dance, “the metaphor is certainly useful, but it overvalues the visual while ignoring the kinesthetic” (2001, p.31). I agree with Davida in her assessment that some scholars of cultural studies seem to have been “increasingly moving dance research towards an eloquent but esoteric turn, creating an increasing closed system of dance discoursing (difficult to comprehend, for instance, for dance practitioners who are not scholars)” (2007, p.5). This seems in direct contradiction to the stated goal of Cultural Studies, namely to dismantle hierarchies of power, from which academic discourse and the authority of universities is inextricable. It is particularly disheartening to see this style of analysis used on the dances of hip hop where mediatized images found in music videos or frozen in a 1980s time capsule from the explosion of movies portraying ‘breakdance’ are used as evidence and primary material, rather than direct encounters

with current practitioners of the form. These types of analysis quickly reveal their lack of ethnographic veracity<sup>9</sup>.

### **1.3.2.1 Ethnohistory and the prioritizing of primary voices**

In seeking to place the subculture of breaking in North America and in Montreal in its socio-historical context, I have undertaken what Cynthia Novack calls an 'ethnohistory' in her pivotal study on contact improvisation (1990). The verbal history is essential in setting the stage for the current breaking culture, both because its early history is largely unwritten and very much misunderstood, but also because breaking is an American dance form. Through verbal testimonies a very integrated mind/body appropriation of hip hop culture and breaking by Canadian youth (largely of African descent and other visible minorities), is revealed<sup>10</sup>.

This search for an understanding of historical context in a marginalized dance form is concurrent with John O. Perpner's call to address issues of cultural diversity in dance history research. He asserts:

Marginalized areas of dance history – because they are in an early stage of development – are capable of being even more accommodating to new [research] approaches. These research areas have a special capacity for engendering new ways of looking at dance because of the groundbreaking nature of the researcher's work; and innovative thinking is imperative because of the contextual complexity that is a part of the dance subject matter being investigated (1999, p.348).

A historical analysis is also essential for understanding a culture through change, rather than as fixed in one time, place and incarnation. Phillip B. Zarrilli, when examining the importance of the social context of a dance as it undergoes change, states:

In order to study performance in a changing cultural context, we must develop more sophisticated strategies for examining the complex interconnected

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<sup>9</sup> Included in this category I would name LaBoskey (2001), Gilroy (1997) and Martin (1998).

<sup>10</sup> See Stevens (2006) in Appendix A for an elaboration of this argument.

networks (artists, patrons/sponsors, audiences, students, etc.) and dynamic cultural systems (artistic market places such as temple festivals, urban arts groups, etc.) within which performance exists. ... This approach is intended to give the reader a clear understanding of the constructedness of performance as a 'complex' of interrelated artistic, social, political, and aesthetic networks without moving to final definitional or descriptive closure (1987, p.11).

Therefore this approach values a fore-fronting of the voices of the dancers themselves, or what Zarrilli calls the 'cultural actors', rather than the so-called 'objective' assessments of the researcher. However, seeking balance in all things, I heed the warnings of several dance scholars and take care to pay attention not only to social context but also to the dance itself, the cultural production, and to issues of aesthetics. Ronström's issue with 'culturalists' who look at social and cultural context to understand dance, is that they neglect the dance itself and operate with "farreaching assumptions and presuppositions" (1988, p. 27-28). Anthropologist and Ethnochoreologist Adrienne Kaeppler also agrees that attention to aesthetics is an area that is often overlooked by Anthropologists, Ethnomusicologists and Ethnochoreologists in fieldwork and writings (2003, p.153).

### **1.3.2.2 Participant-observation**

The key to ethnographic research is the time spent observing and participating in the culture in question. Thomas states that:

Ethnography, ... may be defined as an in-depth study of a culture, institution and context over a sustained period of time, which is usually longer for anthropologists than sociologists. Ethnographic research employs a range of methods and techniques such as participant observation, interviews, field notes, audio and visual recordings and, in the case of dance, movement analysis (2003, p.67).

Traditional ethnography typically also involves extensive travel (in Anthropology up to two years) to a far-away 'exotic' location so that the researcher experiences a total immersion in the cultural 'other'. Guides for this type of research

commonly advise to pack extra pens and water purification tablets. Clearly, the present research is not that type of ethnography.

My research has similarities with the more contemporary trend in Anthropology of doing ethnography ‘at home’, in that the study and the communities investigated are situated in my own city. However, the research spans two communities, that of the contemporary dance world, and that of the breaking world. The former I am very much a member of (in training and occupation), but the latter I am more or less an outsider to. As an early informant told me, ‘hip hop has become popular culture’<sup>11</sup>, and therefore surrounds me. But as a white, rather bookish (i.e. un-hip) woman I am rather conspicuous in vernacular breaking contexts. Therefore, I had to negotiate my place “weaving between insider and outsider perspectives” (Frosch 1999, p.264), taking heed of Marcus’s (1992) requirements for ethnographies of the late twentieth century, by problematizing the local, the temporal, and perspective or voice, to find my way over the shifting sands of transnational migratory identity-formation.

I also negotiated a balance between observing and participating. At a certain point I had to confront my own reticence towards learning breaking movement. Once I took a first step into a breaking class situation, I felt I had opened the door towards a deeper somatic level of understanding of what Jackson refers to as the ‘aesthetic intelligence’ of African American vernacular dancing (2001, p.41). This corporal implication provided me with what Sklar terms the ‘unique bodily experience’ of the researcher’s personal enactment of movement (2001, p.31).

### **1.3.2.3 Collection of data**

The collection of data involved in this research included direct interviews with specific people and a systematic analysis of a wide range of events, as well as a general immersion in the subculture of breaking. My contact with street dance culture began with my involvement as a host and journalist with a dance radio show on

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<sup>11</sup> Helen Simard, un-transcribed interview with author, Montreal, May 2004.

CKUT radio McGill called Movement Museum. My co-host from 2001 to 2005, Katherine Blenkinsop, a street dancer herself, invited several dancers of that genre into on-air discussions. It was here that the transfer of breaking ‘from the streets to the stage’ was initially problematized for me. Feeding into this research was an initial interview with the street dancer Natasha Jean-Bart (b-girl Tash) in May of 2004<sup>12</sup>. A final event attended and analyzed towards the research of this work was the ‘Bust a Move!’ street dance competition in April of 2006. These two moments bracket the research portion of the study as spanning roughly two years. Other activities ‘in the field’ included attending dance classes, hip hop events and dance performances. Each of these activities included textual analysis of the promotional tools of such events, revealing in terms of their representational intentions.

### 1.3.3 Case studies and interviews

In total, nine major interviews contributed to this research. Three case studies were performed. One of a breaking crew (*Flow Rock* crew) and two of Montreal contemporary dance companies that use breaking as a significant foundation to their movement vocabulary (*RBDG* and *Solid State*). Natasha Jean-Bart (b-girl Tash) and David Dundas (b-boy DKC) are two members of the breaking crew *Flow Rock* and are among some of the first breakers in Montreal. Two members of the dance company *Solid State*, Claudia Fancello and Dana Schnitzer<sup>13</sup> were interviewed and the choreographer Victor Quijada from *RBDG* was interviewed. The last two case studies allowed me to focus on specific choreographic work, the structure of dance companies, the struggles particular choreographers face when creating work drawing

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<sup>12</sup> This interview also served the basis for an article published in the *Dance Current* in 2004. See Appendix B.

<sup>13</sup> Since the time of the interviews and the case study research in winter 2004, *Solid State Breakdance Collective* has undergone significant changes in its structure and is in fact now simply *Solid State Breakdance*, directed by remaining original members Helen Simard and JoDee Allen. The research in this document largely references a time before this transition had stabilized.

from breaking culture and movement vocabulary, and the publicity material surrounding these works and companies. These three case studies provided me with clear examples from which to draw my conclusions<sup>14</sup>.

In addition, four individuals were interviewed for additional historical and present-day context, specifically to build a portrait of the Montreal breaking subculture in its vernacular context. Eugene Poku, member of the 1970s funk dance group the *Shaka Brothers* and the funk-acrobatic act *Special Blend* is probably one of the first 'old school' hip hop dancers in Montreal. His partner member of *Special Blend*, Jessie Goldberg, was also interviewed regarding hip hop culture in Montreal in the early 1980s. Johnny Walker Bien-Aimé (b-boy Skywalker), breaking teacher, member of *Tactical* crew and 3 Times Dope Productions, organizing very important local battle events such as *War is War* and *Call-Outs*, provided a perspective on breaking culture in Montreal in the 1990s and today. K8 Alsterlund (b-girl Lynx), teacher, choreographer and winner of several local and international breaking battles, provided equally passionate and informed perspectives on the vernacular scene and the beginnings of *Solid State*, of which she was an early member. All were instructive and enriching interviews.

Interviews were essential for working towards an understanding of subtleties in the dance and in dynamics operating in the community. They were a way for me to fast track into greater understanding of the breaking subculture. Everyone I interviewed was generously forthcoming, allowing me to gain information that observation alone would have taken me a lot longer to gather. Questions were structured but open-ended, allowing for tangents that would create a descriptive landscape of the vernacular breaking scene and the differences, tensions and

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<sup>14</sup> A brief description of each of the subjects of the case studies can be found in Appendices C through E.



processes of change involved in the contemporary breaking dance fusions<sup>15</sup>. It was my intention to invite my informants into the analytical process by sharing my theoretical resources and asking opinion questions. I was respectful of the fact that my informants were both bearers of tradition and cultural agents, themselves negotiating a balance between stability and change.

#### 1.3.4 The contained and extended Dance Event

Davida explains that the Dance Event concept emerged in the 1970s among Euro-American Dance Anthropologists to facilitate the study of non-elite dances (2001, p.77). Adequate analysis of the dance event requires an understanding of who, what, where, when, and why. Folklorist Owe Ronström defines a dance event as:

An interactional unit which can be perceived as something extraordinary, which stands out from the flow of everyday life. It is limited in time and space, beginning when the second person arrives and ending when there is only one person left. It is a type of encounter to which people have come for special reasons, with certain anticipations, and the event is structured in accordance with its visual, cognitive and kinetic focus, the dancing and the music-making (1988, p.23).

Davida also notes that a parallel exists in Performance Studies founder Richard Schechner's conception of Performance Theory as "a basic performance structure of gathering/performing/dispersing" (2001, p.81). The analyst is particularly attentive not only to the central performance activities, but also to the ceremonies that surround them. In her unpublished PHD thesis *Theory and Methods* (1976), Kealiinohomoku first established a framework for the Dance Event and her key distinctions between the 'Extended dance event' where there is no clear beginning and ending, and the 'Contained dance event' where the event has clear temporal boundaries. The dance event provides an instrumental framework for the comparison of vernacular breaking

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<sup>15</sup> A sample of the questions used can be found in Appendix F. A list of interviewees can be found in Appendix G. Consent forms for use of these interviews in this research can be found in Appendix H.

and breaking in contemporary dance.

My use of the dance event framework incorporated Kealiinohomoku (1976) into the more elaborated dance performance analysis grids created by dance scholars Jane Ashdead (1988) and Susan Foster (1986)<sup>16</sup>. From this series of questions my 'field notes' (jot notes sketched out of impressions during or shortly after attendance at a dance event) could be flushed out into a more systematic analysis. The applicability of Ashdead and Foster's contributions to a non-elite dance event was revealing: they pushed me to look at elements such as lighting, staging and promotional materials, etc. that I might not otherwise have considered<sup>17</sup>.

This distinction between the contained and extended event formed the basis for my divisions of chapters three: breaking in vernacular contexts, and four: breaking in performing arts contexts. The sub-questions (who, what, where, when and why) structure the content.

#### 1.4 Literature survey

The dances associated with hip hop culture have been only minimally explored in an academic, theorized manner. Their history is embedded in mainly oral and corporeal sources, debated and reconfigured on the dance floors, in the informal moments surrounding their execution, and, more recently, in website discussion forums, rather than among dance analysts and historians. While certain aspects of the culture – mainly the rap artists and hip hop clothing styles, have been made very commercially accessible to the general public, the street dance or vernacular culture of hip hop remains a relatively insular culture. The majority of scholars that do undertake analysis of hip hop culture almost exclusively focus on those very visible and mass-media appropriated aspects of music and the fashion and music global

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<sup>16</sup> See Appendix I for an example of this tailored grid of questions.

<sup>17</sup> A list of the events I formally analyzed is included in Appendix J.

economy (for example Flores 2000 and Negron-Muntaner 2004).

In contrast, this investigation takes as its subject a very specific phenomenon within this culture – that of the translocation of the vernacular dance to the contemporary art stage context. The process of change itself is only minimally explored in academic dance texts – the worlds of elite dance and vernacular or non-elite dance existing often in two separate theoretical paradigms – that of aesthetics and that of social studies. Western stage dance traditions have mainly been studied by art historians and critics, while folk dances, non-Western dances (both on stage and off), and popular dances have been studied by folklorists, anthropologists and sociologists. The aim of this investigation is to bridge the two worlds and understand how one can affect the other.

I have categorized my literary sources into three intersecting groups of texts that form the basis of the literature research for this thesis. My survey of these texts will move from the specific to the general. First I address the texts that deal with breaking, its concurrent dance forms, and the context of hip hop culture in general. Rose (1994), Osumare (2001, 2002), Chang (2005) and popular sources such as magazine and Internet articles have been particularly stimulating in this category. Second I explore texts that theorize African American vernacular dance, notably texts by Friedland (1983, 1995), Dixon-Gottschild (1996), and Jackson (2001). Third are the theoretical texts that have been helpful in bridging between the vernacular context and the elite context. Key texts in this vein include those written by Kealiinohomoku (1976), Ronström (1988) and Nahachewsky (1995, 2001).

#### **1.4.1 Breaking and Hip hop culture**

While texts on hip hop culture abound, those that adequately represent breaking are few and far between. It is a lengthy task to work through texts that touch on breaking, be they popular texts or academic, to sort useful information from faulty or misleading information. This section is divided into two categories: popular sources and academic sources on breaking and hip hop culture.

#### 1.4.1.1 Popular sources

Post-modern dance critic and scholar Sally Banes was breaking's first academic fan, although her articles on breaking are for the most part written in a journalistic style. In 1981 she wrote what was probably the first article on this dance phenomenon in the New York weekly the *Village Voice*, and in doing so contributed to its meteoric rise in popularity in the beginning of that decade. She continued to follow this dance and wrote several articles in the 1980s, which were compiled (among others) in her 1994 anthology, *Writing dancing in the age of postmodernism*. These articles offer a rather nostalgic view by an academic who seems to have touched upon a vibrant subculture at the moment that it was first being co-opted by the mass media machine. As breaking gained public notoriety, Banes often bemoaned this transformation in her articles. Disappointingly her anthology offers no re-contextualization of these early articles, nor does it shed new light on the dance in the wake of its revival in the 1990s. Her interest in 'break dance' as she puts it, seems to have ended with her brief entry for the *International Encyclopedia of Dance* in 1998, where she reports its virtual disappearance, an obvious error on her part.

Other journalistic sources from the early 1980s include the various articles in *Dance Magazine*, and other American dance magazines, the majority of them written in 1984 (Cox, Grubb in April, June and October, Hamilton, Rosenwald and Pierpont in *Dance Magazine*; Mollov in *Ballet News* and Morgan in *Contact Quarterly*). In 1984 alone there were no less than five issues of *Dance Magazine* that printed articles on 'breakdancing', including a feature with a cover photo in the April issue. The following August the magazine *Ballet News* also devoted its cover article to 'breakdancing'. One article from the 1980s appeared in a Montreal newspaper (Lavoie 1984). These articles, like Banes' also reflect a time when breaking was a very new and exciting phenomenon. These articles operate as important secondary historical sources, revealing facts that helped build the historical analysis in chapter two.

Other popular sources from the 1980s include the commercial motion pictures and paperback instructional books, generally profiting from the dance's mainstream popularity. These sources are for the most part dismissed by breakers today as misrepresentations of the dance and its culture, but can be examined as primary (although not authentic) sources to be read with a critical eye. Movies include the independently produced *Wild Style* (Ahearn 1982) and the more commercial *Beat Street* (Lathan 1984). Some of the instructional books offer short and questionable histories of the dance (for example Nadell and Small 1984; Elfman 1984; Marlow 1984). Definitely the best of the genre is *Hip hop: the illustrated history of break dancing, rap music, and graffiti* by Steven Hager (1984), compiled using interviews directly with youth involved in early hip hop culture.

Fast-forward to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and we find a fertile source of more current popular writing on breaking on the Internet in websites such as *Rock Steady* crew member Mr. Wiggle's website ([www.mrwiggles.biz](http://www.mrwiggles.biz)) which has a history section and a discussion forum, Popmaster Fable's e-newsletter *Tools of War* ([toolsofwar@gmail.com](mailto:toolsofwar@gmail.com)) which previews events, classes and relates a political perspective to hip hop culture, and the pop culture encyclopaedia *Wikipedia* ([www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)), which offers articles on anything from movies to dance forms. These un-academic and unedited texts hold a valuable uncensored source of the very current dialogue and divergent views of the cultural actors in the transnational (and virtual) breaking subculture.

Post-1984 journalistic articles are also revealing, however honest attempts to provide context by summarizing the earlier history of breaking has invariably resulted in misinformation. Montreal examples (Roy 1995, Ben Saâdoune 1998, Renaud 2000, 2004, Greenaway 2001) none-the-less give vital clues to build a more recent portrait of the breaking community in Montreal, including the short-lived hip hop magazine *Vibepius Magazine* (later *Unistar Magazine*) with articles by Jane K (2005a,b) and editor Myriam Laabidi (2005a,b).

#### 1.4.1.2 Academic texts on breaking and hip hop culture

Adequate scholarly texts on breaking are difficult to find. A major problem in academic texts is the misrepresentation or conflation of distinct dances within hip hop culture. Read critically, these texts can still offer some interesting perspectives and information. To be fair, when breaking hit a wider consciousness, the form was already merging with Funk dance styles, then called the Electric Boogie in New York City. It is not surprising that early writers did not make a distinction between these dance forms, however it is disappointing that later writers have not pushed for a deeper understanding of the dances of hip hop culture.

Lynne Emery's *Black Dance from 1619 to today* (1988) includes a brief section on 'breakdancing' in its second edition written by Brenda Dixon-Gottschild (then Dixon-Stowell). Like Banes, Dixon-Stowell (through a quote by another *Village Voice* journalist Marcia Pally), focuses on the alterations in the dance since its popular recognition. The following section on Michael Jackson and the impact of his dance performances is also very useful.

Tricia Rose's *Black noise: Rap music and black culture in contemporary America* (1994) was a keystone academic monograph, which marked the emergence of the field of Hip Hop Studies in America. Rose conducts a pertinent analysis on the socio-economic and cultural context in which hip hop transpired, situating the culture's emergence as a negotiation between black cultural expressive imperatives and social marginalization. However, Rose, like Dixon-Stowell (1988) neglects to address breaking in favour of the electric boogie, especially in her consideration of the meaning of the movement, deeming it a conscious reflection of modern technology (1994, p.38).

Two articles on dance appeared in the 1996 collection of essays *Droppin' science: Critical essays on Rap music and Hip Hop culture*, edited by Eric Perkins. In this, Robert Farris Thompson attempts a very 'hip' reading of breakdance by tracing, in very colloquial language, the ancient African and African-Caribbean roots of recent dancing. Katrina Hazzard-Donald looks to a more recent past to explore the cyclical

quality of African American social dance, or what she calls the 'recycling' of dance fragments. While some of her descriptions are accurate, her three stages of hip hop dancing ('waack', 'breakdancing', and 'rap dancing') are bizarrely-named and off in timing. Again, she mourns the commercialization of hip hop culture and the changes this inflicted on the dance.

Apart from these two volumes, most scholarly writing on hip hop in the 1990s centred on the mass-media traffic in images, especially in the music and fashion industry, leaving the vernacular, embodied culture of breaking and other hip hop dance subcultures aside. Rap lyrics were analyzed and rap artists became central as they took over the media limelight and 'gangsta' activity and anti-Semitism tarnished the initial good party-vibe of hip hop. A simple search of hip hop titles in any library database reveals this bias.

A more recent surge of publishing on hip hop has demonstrated a renewed interest in giving voice to the early actors of the culture. These works include Brewster & Broughton's *Last night a DJ saved my life: The history of the disc jockey* (2000), Cooper and Walta's *Hip hop files: Photographs 1979-1984* (2004), and Chang's *Can't stop, won't stop: A history of the hip-hop generation* (2005). These volumes are descriptive histories rather than abstract theorizations. Breaking is given its due space alongside other aspects of a multiple-layered culture, with the music again typically taking centre stage. Chang digs into the socio-political context surrounding the emergent culture, while Cooper and Walta's book is made up almost exclusively of photographs and citations. Both photos and citations are vital primary sources, revealing raw details removed of academic interpretations.

In a similar vein, the documentary film *The Freshest Kids* (Israel, 2002) provides a fast-paced history and explanation of breaking made up exclusively of interviews with key originators of the dance style. *What is a B-boy?* (Miller 2004) does somewhat the equivalent for the Montreal breaking community, although with narration and no crediting of his interviewees.

In contrast Gilroy (1997), Martin (1998) and De Frantz (2004) seem to be working from abstractions rather than experience. The last article explores the nature of black social dance as having a dual purpose: for the benefit of the dancers and as a performance for outsiders. De Frantz questions whether the power of the dance is retained when outsiders appropriate it. While his questioning is pertinent and appropriate to my research, his answers are inconclusive.

Halifu Osumare is a rare dance scholar who very successfully combines ethnographic field research on breaking and hip hop culture with theorizations. Her article "Global breakdancing and the intercultural body" (2002) centres around a hip hop event witnessed by the author in Hawaii in 1998, using it as a springboard for exploring the negotiation of cultural and personal, borrowed and indigenous identity in global hip hop youth. Her conclusion that hip hop is a transnational subculture where commercialized images of hip hop are transformed or 'indigenized' by global youth is very pertinent to my research on the appropriation of breaking in Montreal.

There are several published articles and books coming from France and Belgium (Galloni d'Istria 1997, Preszow 1996, Midol 1995) which directly address dances of hip hop. For the most part these texts speak of the European context, lexicon and history, which is very different from the Montreal reality. Texts by Claudine Moïse are one exception, as they do broaden into a more general and therefore pertinent analysis of the nature of generational transmission of hip hop dances (1998) and of the circle cypher (2004).

#### **1.4.2 African American Vernacular Dance**

Considering the paucity of literature that deals directly and adequately with breaking, I have drawn extensively on the substantial scholarly literature available on African American dance. This follows the observations of Rose (1994), Thompson (1996) and Hazzard-Donald (1996) discussed earlier that situate hip hop dances as a continuum of African and African American expression. These texts address issues of aesthetics both in black dance and socio-cultural context. However, as the historical



analysis in chapter two will reveal, there is also a very strong Latin and Afro-Caribbean influence in breaking and hip hop culture. Unfortunately extensive analysis of this influence in the dance is lacking in scholarly sources. Latino Studies is a very young academic discipline, and the few volumes that address American's 'social amnesia' concerning for example the Puerto Rican contributions to cultural activity in America, such as Juan Flores' *From bbomba to hip hop* (2000) and Frances Negron-Muntaner in *Boricua pop* (2004) fail to address breaking, again prioritizing music and musicians.

There is a body of literature identifying qualities of movement common to African diasporic dances. Various authors have dealt with these principles, reconfiguring them in slightly different ways, beginning with Zora Neale Hurston's essay "Characteristics of Negro expression" in 1933 (reprint 1999), continuing with Robert Farris Thompson's "An aesthetic of the cool" in 1966, which links forms of African American dance with West African dance (reprint 1999), Dolores Kirton Cayou's introduction to her book *Modern Jazz Dance* (1971), and including Brenda Dixon-Gottschild's examination of what she terms 'Africanist aesthetics' (1995, 1996) and Jacqui Malone's analysis of the distinctive features of African American artistic expression (1996), among others. Many of the features discussed in each of these texts overlap, often with differing terminology.

In this study I drew in particular on Dixon-Gottschild's five qualities of Africanist Aesthetics and Malone's six characteristics of African American vernacular dance. Malone's characteristics include the centrality of rhythm, improvisation, control, angularity and asymmetry to danced expression, as well as its dynamism, or participatory nature. Similar to Malone's focus on rhythm, Dixon-Gottschild's principle of 'polycentrism/polyrhythm' describes "movement [that] may emanate from any part of the body, and two or more centres may operate simultaneously" (1995, p.106). Dixon-Gottschild's interpretation of the 'aesthetic of the cool' is the direct equivalent of Malone's 'control,' described by the former as, "an attitude... which combines composure with vitality... carelessness cultivated

with a calculated aesthetic clarity” (1995, p.109). Her ‘embracing the conflict’ is described as a precept of contrariety, or an encounter of opposites, as in between awkward and smooth, or aggressive and soft, while ‘high-affect juxtaposition’ is, “mood, attitude, or movement breaks that omit the transitions and connective links valued in the European academic aesthetic” (1995, p.107). Both principles are similar to Malone’s features of angularity or flexed lines and asymmetry such as abrupt and unexpected changes (1996). ‘Ephebism,’ a quality Malone does not address, is described by Dixon-Gottschild to include “attributes such as power, vitality, flexibility, drive and attack” (1996, p.15). I will examine improvisation and dynamism, the features described by Malone but not by Dixon-Gottschild in more depth in section 1.5.2 Reproducibility. Jackson’s (2001) in depth exploration of improvisation in African American vernacular dance is however worth mentioning here as a key text exploring African American vernacular dance’s aesthetic logic.

Malone asserts black dance’s inherent multidimensionality, or the inseparability of artistic disciplines and of artistry from social function (e.g. spiritual dimension) (1996, p.229). Based on her extensive fieldwork among African American youth in Philadelphia (1983, 1995), similarly LeeEllen Friedland identifies five elements of artistic performance in African American culture to which movement performance is interrelated. These are body movement, sound, visual forms (including graffiti, hairstyle and dress), language and ‘attitude’ (which includes social behaviour, ethics and aesthetics) (1995, p.138). These elements mirror Malone’s assertion of the importance of style in dress, hair, attitude or demeanour, language and movement (including posture, gait, and a stylized personal way of doing everyday things). This is also kin to what Anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu calls the ‘habitus,’ defined by Osumare as unconsciously enacted cultural and individual learned patterns (2002).

Friedland divides African American performance activity into three kinds of movement genres: ‘being rhythmic’; dancing (social and exhibition) and ‘movement play.’ The last is unique in its use of social commentary, which itself is divided into four types: annotation (distortion, exaggeration of existing move); imitation (of icons

of popular culture); mocking (local personalities); and ridicule of social attitudes (1995). Friedland's distinction between social and exhibition dancing has been of particular use to me.

Understanding the history, context and aesthetics of African American vernacular dance creates an important counterpoint to the 'norm' of Western theatrical dance. Some of these authors have addressed the question of the transference of the vernacular to the stage existence, notably Joyce Aschenbrenner's monograph on Katherine Dunham's work (1981), although generally only as a peripheral issue. The following section will explore this question in more depth.

### **1.4.3 Academic framework**

In my search for an adequate framework to bridge between a dance form embedded in culture and a dance work as artistic production, I have come up against several difficulties. Biased categorization is both a pragmatic issue of nomenclature (touched on briefly earlier in section 1.2.2) and reflects a bifurcation of research approaches and frameworks. The following sections reflect this struggle and the resulting framework I have developed in order to cope with this circumstance.

#### **1.4.3.1 Schism in approaches**

Kealiinohomoku's 1970 article "An Anthropologist looks at ballet as a form of ethnic dance" (reprint 1983) identifies the fissure between the anthropological and art history approaches. On the one hand is an approach that traditionally studies dances that are imbedded in a cultural (generally non-Western) context, and on the other an approach that concentrates on performances of ballet and its descendants, modern and 'post-modern' or contemporary dance.

This division is based on a very different perspective of the nature of 'art'. In the West, art is not seen to fulfil any particular function in society; 'art is for art's sake' as the saying goes. Therefore, we can speak of the 'work of art' or the 'art object', (in French '*l'oeuvre*'), typically produced by the individual inspired artist. Art in the

Western sense has its proper home: the static visual arts (painting, sculpture, photography, installation) in the art gallery or museum and the performing arts in the theatre or concert hall. Conversely, in the anthropological vision art can appear everywhere; art typically embellishes an already functional object or event. Dance, viewed through the anthropological lens, serves a social function. Valda Blundell describes this perspective in her study guide 'New Directions in the Anthropological Study of Art':

Art is seen as part of the fabric of everyday life. [...] Anthropologists generally focus not only on the work of art itself but also on its production and use in the society where it is found. Art is viewed within the context of a tradition, that is, a set of conventions for its production and use, and the members of a particular society are seen as sharing these conventions as well as having culturally specific and shared ideas about what constitutes a pleasing aesthetic form (1993, p.7).

This schism in perspectives has had negative repercussions for the serious critical study of forms that are 'other' than the theatrical norm set by ballet. Non-theatrical forms were for a long time not considered worthy of aesthetic analysis. As Perperner states:

In much of the criticism and history of twentieth-century European American theatrical dance, the first criterion that has traditionally determined which artists and works are worthy of serious consideration or not is the degree to which they meet the established aesthetic standards in one of two dance genres – ballet or modern. Popular entertainment forms are categorically denied, because of distinctions between 'high' and 'low' art. Some dance is not acceptable because of its innovative departure from mainstream aesthetics; or, as in the case of African American dance, it is not acceptable because of the entrenched racial biases that affect the ways in which it is perceived (1999, p.340).

While on one hand dance historians have ignored non-theatrical dance, on the other hand, Anthropologist Adrienne Kaeppler states that attention to aesthetics is an area that is often overlooked by Anthropologists, Ethnomusicologists and Ethnochoreologists in fieldwork and writings (2003, p.154). Kaeppler defines aesthetics not as the Western-bound concept of 'beauty' but as evaluation and

evaluative ways of thinking. Each culture's aesthetic principles are based on an underlying organization so that "dance aesthetics should not be looked at in isolation, but as part of an overall system of thought of a specific group of people in a specific time period" (2003, p.154) It is this neglect of aesthetics in Dance Anthropology that has reinforced what Jackson speaks of as Western society's rejection of the possibility of 'aesthetic intelligence' in African American vernacular dance. He states that, "although an inseparability between sociocultural concepts and aesthetics might seem obvious cross-culturally, aesthetic theory in dance studies has often separated discussion of creative process from cultural interpretation" (2001, p.42).

This perspective is changing, however. More and more dance texts are being written which bridge this divide, so that ethnographic texts examine 'high art' forms such as ballet and contemporary dance, while non-theatrical dances are being considered for their aesthetic value (Davida 2007). Davida's thesis represents one such document. However, thirty years after Kealiinohomoku's article a persistent divide remains between the study of elite Western forms and the ethnographic methodology, as Jane Desmond witnesses in her article 'Terra incognita: Mapping new territory in Dance and "Cultural Studies"' (2000, p.44). It is still rare to find writings on dance which address the question of categorization, and which seek to rectify the double meanings of art and culture. The reason for this divide is perhaps that dance research is still in its infancy, and researchers are still working within one type of dance, rather than bridging between different types of dance, as suggests Nahachewsky (1995, p.2).

#### **1.4.3.2 Categorical distinctions**

The two areas under study in this paper, breaking in its vernacular and performing arts contexts, are each examined in chapters three and four respectively. For the sake of analysis I have divided the entire Montreal breaking picture into these artificial binary opposites. It is my hope that such a division does not create reductive

compartments, but that the analysis is nuanced and cross-referenced enough so as to demonstrate the very rich and complex nature of the dance in the Montreal landscape.

This categorization can be reinforced by several sources. As mentioned earlier in section 1.3.4, Kealiinohomoku makes a key distinction between contexts in relationship to the aspect of time in her categories of 'extended' and 'contained' events. Contained events are those in which there is a recognizable beginning and conclusion, as in a theatrical context, while extended events have fluid boundaries between beginning and endings, as in social events (1976, p.237). Owe Ronström's use of sociologist Ervin Goffman's concepts of 'frame analysis' are very much in tune with this line of reasoning (1988; 1974). Goffman states that all events are comprised of the 'game', the encased or framed event that seems to be central to the gathering and the 'spectacle', the informal activities that surround the game. By focusing on the nature of the transition between game and spectacle, be it either highly ritualized and formalized, or casual and gradual, Ronström makes a similar distinction, helping him define the dance event anew:

An event is focused interaction. In the centre we find the perceptive focus, the theme or the game. The game is encased by all kinds of activities belonging to the spectacle and it will be possible to arrange all the activities in a kind of hierarchy, from more to less important, from central to peripheral activities. The innermost doings are carefully performed, watched and judged upon, the peripheral may pass by without anybody paying much attention to them. In some events the shift from spectacle to game may come fast and without much ceremonies, in others it may take hours of ritualized performances to pass from the outer to inner realms of an event. But common to all events is that when this border is passed, there is an important perceptive shift which structures the whole event anew (1988, p.24-25).

Nahachewsky's very pertinent distinctions between participatory and presentational dance offer another possible categorical distinction (1995). On the one hand, the dance where the purpose is participation, where the dance is evaluated based on how it feels to the dancers and tending to take place in community gatherings. On the other hand, dance for the purpose of presentation, therefore product oriented, judged by how it looks and taking place on a formal stage or a

space where there is a clear physical and cultural distance between performer and audience. He notes that concrete examples exist not in one tidy camp or the other, but along the continuum between the two extremes (1995, p.1-2). While this distinction is very revelatory, Nahachewsky's 2001 reflections on folk theorist Felix Hoerburger's 1965 and 1968 discussions on folk dance revivals in contrast to their 'originals' (elaborated on in more depth in the following section 1.5 Theoretical Groundings) proved to be a more useful anchorage for the analysis in this paper.

Nahachewsky's 2000 adaptation of folk theorist Kim Vasylenko's (1976; 1983) three 'principles of theatricalization' used by choreographers in the adaptation of folk dance to the stage is also useful to this discussion. These principles or approaches move from greater 'authenticity' or similarity to an original against which the theatricalized version is compared; to greater artistic license by the choreographer.

In his examination of State folk dance ensembles, Anthony Shay's use of the term 'in the field' to distinguish between official and informal contexts is also parallel to this discussion, although the term denotes a rural setting seemingly non-inclusive of urban African American vernacular dances (1999). Jackson more justly uses the term 'originating social context' to refer to vernacular dances in their vernacular contexts, opposing them with 'alienated' contexts, both commercial and artistic.

Jackson does assert however that exhibition dancing in exchange for money is not "absent from black vernacular dancing in originating social contexts" (2001, p.49). Similarly, Shay states that "... dancing in the field also exhibits a wide variety of staging and presentational techniques, some of which approach the theatricalization of presentations seen within the repertoires of some national dance companies" (1999, p.30-31). This reinforces the idea that there are no fixed and absolute categories but in fact there is slippage, exceptions and cross-pollination. Shay suggests the term 'parallel traditions' to describe dances which exist both in the field and on stage, two separate genres with similarities but significant differences operating in a dynamic cycle of exchange (1999, p.31). Clearly conclusive lines are

difficult to draw on a theoretical level. While the particularities of breaking do not adhere strictly to all of the theorists' divisions and descriptions, I have, where necessary, borrowed and adapted their observations.

### **1.5 Theoretical groundings**

In order to substantiate and more deeply understand both the cultural and aesthetic systems at work in each of the categories I have identified (vernacular and performing arts), I have found divergent sources, both within Folk Dance Studies, Ethnochoreology and African American dance analysis texts. According to Nahachewsky, Hoerburger identifies four aspects key to the difference between what he calls folk dance in its 'first' and 'second' existence (2001, p.18). Each of these four aspects will be applied to the distinction between dance in vernacular and performing arts contexts. They will be elaborated on in the following sections with references from various authors who will nuance each aspect, especially in its relation to African American vernacular dance. I have termed these four aspects aesthetic ideology, reproducibility, transmission, and consciousness. Each is interrelated. In chapter three these elements will be applied to the specificities of vernacular breaking in Montreal, and in chapter four they will be applied to the contemporary dance fusions of my Montreal case studies.

#### **1.5.1 Aesthetic ideology**

The primary distinction between dance in vernacular and performing arts contexts is its relationship to the society that encompasses it. I term this its aesthetic ideology. This relates to Hoerburger's suggestion that a key distinction between dances is their role in community. According to him, folk dance in its first existence is an integral part of the life of a population. The dance belongs to the entire community, rather than being the property of only a few interested people (Nahachewsky 2001, p.18). Kealiinohomoku similarly states that 'extended' dance



events are ones in which the dance is totally enmeshed in the larger event, the dance made meaningless if performed out of its specific social and cultural context (1976, p.237). Malone speaks of the inseparability of artistry from its social function (for example its spiritual dimension) in African American vernacular dance. Along with the inseparability of artistic disciplines, she calls this aspect African American vernacular dance's 'multidimensionality' (1996, p.229).

In contrast the dance in a 'contained' event, according to Kealiinohomoku, "is an end in itself, no matter how imbued it is with other functions..." It is identifiable by its limits, Kealiinohomoku continues, "it needs a limited number of skilled practitioners; it uses a specific piece of time, and within that limited time it probably does not depend on extreme use of redundancy for its effectiveness" (1976, p.237). This definition fits perfectly with dance in performing arts contexts.

An essential feature of Western elite dance is that dance 'pieces' are created. A 'dance' is performed, rather than a form danced. This kind of dance is an 'oeuvre', the same way a painting is a work of art. Elite dance performance generally follows Aristotle's formula of the beginning, middle and end (1997). Philosopher Richard Shusterman refers to the legacy of romanticism when he speaks of "art's traditional ideal of unity and integrity" which can't be carelessly tempered with, stolen, plagiarized or even adapted (2000, p.65). He continues that the "ideologies of romanticism and art for art's sake have reinforced our habit of treating artworks as transcendent and virtually sacred ends in themselves, whose integrity we should respect and never violate" (ibid). Artworks of this kind 'traffic in culture' as a kind of commodity, a marketable object (Marcus and Myers 1995), through institutions such as dance theatres, presenters and funding bodies. It is 'bought' by a middleman, the presenter, and 'sold' to a public. It is given a title and an individual called the choreographer signs his or her name as the 'author' to the creation.

This author or choreographer is considered to be an Artist, with all of the social cachet that word implies. "The word 'Artist' has a built-in, intrinsically understood

capital 'A' in Western perception" (Kealiinohomoku 1976, p.22). Shusterman concurs:

Romanticism and its cult of genius likened the artist to a divine creator and advocated that his works be altogether new and express his singular personality. Modernism, with its commitment to artistic progress and the avant-garde, reinforced the dogma that radical novelty was the essence of art. Though artists have always borrowed from each other's works, this fact was generally ignored or implicitly denied through the ideology of originality, which posed a sharp distinction between original creation and derivative borrowing (2000, p.64).

I call this distinction the 'aesthetic ideology' or a dance's macro-structure. This is to distinguish between aesthetics that shape the conception of the dance and aesthetics of style, or the micro-structure or the compositional devices of a dance.

### **1.5.2 Reproducibility**

Closely related to dance's aesthetic ideology is the notion of its reproducibility, that is, to what degree a dance stays exactly the same each time it is performed. Hoeburger states that first existence folk dance involves improvisations within a specified framework, while second existence folk dance has fixed figures and movements with only slight variations. Dance in vernacular and performing art contexts can likewise be analyzed as to the degree of their use of improvisation versus structured composition.

Elite dance pieces are contained units that generally exist in stable form. Each piece will be very different in movement vocabulary one from the other, but each is most often created so that they can be repeated with the same sequence of movement over consecutive performances. Those choreographers whose very artistic practice is to question these norms generally create the exceptions to this standard configuration.

Vernacular dances, in contrast, are based on a somewhat standardized and collectively learnt lexicon of movement, which in performance will be spontaneously sequenced according to certain broad rules. With this type of improvisation comes the possibility of dialogic interaction among participants, including the spectators.

The centrality of improvisation to African American vernacular dance forms is explored to a significant degree in dance literature. In particular are the works by Stearns (1968), Dixon-Gottschild (1996), and Malone (1996). These texts are useful in dissecting the process of improvisation in the dance form of breaking. However definitions need to be clarified, as there remains considerable vagueness and biases in much of the standard literature on improvisation<sup>18</sup>. Jackson notes that in general literature on improvisation in dance is:

Overwhelmingly directed toward concertized modes of dancing originated primarily by European or Euro-American innovators in idioms identified as modern dance, classical ballet, and even musical theatre dancing (by such choreographers as Jack Cole, Gus Giardano, and Bob Fosse) (2001, p.43).

Improvisation in Western elite dance and vernacular dance has been approached and understood differently. Hayes points out that the differences in improvisation in post-modern dance and vernacular forms such as Flamenco are significant. Similar observations might be made regarding the differences between post-modern dance and African diasporic vernacular dance forms such as breaking. Hayes states:

Flamenco dance and postmodern improvisation forms do not share the same cultural history. They employ different uses of movement, syntax, space, and time. The ideal body that results from the training in each area has a specific configuration of gender attributes, racial identity, and class consciousness (2003, p.109).

Improvisation in Western elite dance appeared with post-modern dance, but is not exclusive to it. In this context, improvisation is very often seen as a tool in the creation process of what will eventually be set choreography, rather than integral to the form in performance. It is a means to explore ideas and movement freely, almost like a brainstorming session, before the editing process sets in. Later, in the choreographic phase, most of the time these improvisations are adjusted, tailored,

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<sup>18</sup> For example, Albright and Gere's 2003 anthology entitled *Taken by surprise: A dance improvisation reader* is a case in point: non-western approaches to improvisation are relegated to one section, apologetically entitled 'Expanding the canon', while the entire rest of the book addresses Western dance forms.

modified and fixed into one repeatable sequence of movement. It is similar to the writing of a text like the present document, which has undergone several stages, versions and edits, before a final version is committed to and made available to a public.

The analogy could be extended to compare improvisation in vernacular dance to spontaneous speech, which is a performance formulated in the moment of its utterance. At its essence, improvisation is the sequencing of movement as it is being enacted. In other words, the sequencing and execution of the movement is simultaneous, so that choices are constantly being made and realized as they are being danced. Jackson formulates this by stating that improvisation is the 'creative structuring' of human movement 'in the moment' of performance (2001, p.44). Similarly, Anca Giurchescu (drawing on her research on Romanian folk dances) sees improvisation as a convergence of processes, "fused at the final moment, which coincide with the act of dancing" (1983, p.27). In contrast, composition according to her, requires pre-planning: "... the fulfilment of a composition is on principle preceded by mental preparation in successive, distinct phases" (ibid). Composition is therefore the sequencing of movement fixed well in advance of the enacting or performing of the dance.

In non-concertized instances of post-modern dance, including contact improvisation, authentic movement, body-mind centring and others, the goal is effectively to eschew all dance technique; all pre-conceived and patterned movement in order to create movement without form. The only form that might be imposed is the frame, rules that will change depending on the circumstance, or in the case of a presentational concert situation, a loose score that will frame the performance in time. While the ideal is to rid the body of patterning based on earlier movement training, Western-trained dancers are rarely able to remove all references of that training in their bodies. They certainly cannot, as might be assumed, spontaneously perform a vernacular form simply because it is improvised. Like speech, dance forms have a language, a limited vocabulary of movement and rules of syntax. The 'artfulness' of

vernacular improvisation is to be inventive within the limits of the vocabulary and syntax of the form. It is to forge a distinctive, perhaps even a characteristic way of expanding the rules, by inserting slang, or poetic tropes.

If we take the word ‘choreography’ to mean the scripting of movement without value placed on when the scripting takes place ‘vis-à-vis’ its enactment, we can understand Jackson’s statement that “... in African-American vernacular dancing improvisation *is* choreography” (emphasis in the original, 2001, p.42). Choreography is in this context the way the basic units of movement are put together, ordered, assembled. It is subtly different from the familiar way the word is used to signify the finished work, the ‘art piece.’

Several authors point to the dialogic nature of improvisation, in particular in dance in Africa (Drewal 2003 and Gore 2001). This dialogue might be between dancers, between dancers and musicians, and between dancers and spectators. This dialogic nature is ‘give’ as well as ‘take’ or ‘call’ and ‘response’ – dancers interact with other elements as if in conversation. The dancer both sends out movement messages and answers to the messages being received. One could even view vernacular dancers’ relationship to the form itself as dialogic, in that the dancers are in constant negotiation with their ability to push the boundaries of the form. This relates to De Frantz’s suggestion of a system of communication that aligns speech with movement, to describe the ability of black social dance to incite action. He states that “within black social dance constructions, dancing black bodies express actionable assertions,” and calls this process ‘corporeal orature’ (2004, p.66). Malone names the participatory nature of African American vernacular dances its ‘dynamism’ (1996, p.233).

This artistry of vernacular improvisation, be it in breaking, funk dances, tap dance, African dance, or Flamenco is often negated or at least played down in much of the standard literature on dance. Hayes states that the reduction of improvisation to being merely ‘natural’ is troubling (2003, p.108). This romanticization suggests racial stereotypes such as ‘all black people can dance’ and ‘it’s in their blood’. These sorts

of vague generalizations are troubling because they insinuate that there is no technique or preparation involved in improvised dance forms. It negates the artistry and skill of the individual dancer and historical development of the dance form. It prioritizes Western dance forms, as if institutionalized training and explicitly choreographed movement make a dance more sophisticated, more difficult, more legitimate. Cynthia Novack in her monograph on the post-modern dance form 'contact improvisation' notes that this distinction between set choreography and improvised performance was one way that the first modern choreographers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century attempted to claim status as 'high' art. She states that:

Early [modern] choreographers ... sought to elevate modern dance to the status of an art form, insisting on a new role for dance in America. Consequently, they ... help[ed] to establish a division between improvisation and set choreography. Ironically, Isadora Duncan, who had taught improvisationally and who may have improvised in performance, had also tried to distance her "high" art from the "primitive" improvisations of "Negro jazz dance" and music (1997, p.18).

Dixon-Gottschild points out that many of the innovations in modern and post-modern dance were in fact (unacknowledged) 'Africanist' borrowings, such as the use of bare feet and improvisation (1995, p.99). Hayes points out, however, that the differences in improvisation in post-modern dance and vernacular forms such as Flamenco are significant. The same might be said for African diasporic vernacular dance forms such as breaking. Hayes states:

Flamenco dance and postmodern improvisation forms do not share the same cultural history. They employ different uses of movement, syntax, space, and time. The ideal body that results from the training in each area has a specific configuration of gender attributes, racial identity, and class consciousness (2003, p.109).

### **1.5.3 Transmission**

Again Hoerburger distinguishes between contrasting contexts in which a dance is taught and learnt. In their first existence, dances are learned informally and unselfconsciously, while in their second existence dances are taught by specialists

(Nahachewsky 2001, p.18). Anthony Shay elaborates on a very similar point in Joann Kealiinohomoku's article on folk dance (1972, p.397). According to them both, dancing in the folk or vernacular context is taught as part of a living tradition, in informal situations, through one-on-one contact (Shay, 1999 p.32). Along the same lines, Pietrobruno, in her examination of Salsa, calls this cultural setting and informal instruction the 'lived context'. She elaborates on this process of informal instruction in the lived context of a dance:

Most people who grow up with the dance acquire it in childhood, its movements often taught indirectly through the corporeal language of the body, so that those raised with the dance may not have a sense that they have learned it. Dancing usually is done to music: there is no separation between the rhythm of the music and the steps of the dance. ... The salsa that develops in a lived context involves more than a series of steps and turns: dancers execute movements with their entire bodies. The subtle, but essential elements of the dance, such as how dancers hold their bodies, move their heads, position their hands and isolate various body parts are rooted in motor control and movements that are extensions of wider cultural expression. ... A child may be formally taught specific footwork and turn patterns of salsa, but picks up body isolations by experiencing the family dance culture, similar to acquiring everyday gestures. Although these subtle separations of parts of the body may seem effortless to the outside viewer, their performance involves a great deal of skill and dexterity. Individuals of Latin descent, who are dispersed throughout the Americas, often learn the dance as an extension of their heritage (2002).

Both Friedland and Malone also assert that this type of transmission of dancing and dances is essential to African American vernacular dancing. Friedland states that responding physically to musical patterns of rhythm and melody begins at a very young age and is reinforced as a valuable skill by the praise it garners (1995, p.139-140). Malone adds that many African American children's games revolve around dance, play serving as a training ground for performance. Malone takes this one step further by suggesting that 'fair' play learnt in games (or ethics) can be equated with 'good' play (or aesthetics), so that children simultaneously learn what is fair and what makes a good performance (1996, p.226-227).

In formal performing arts contexts emphasis is placed on the institutional learning of dance. In ballet, dancers acquire the right to perform after undergoing a rigorous and standardized training from a very young age. Teaching technique is standardized through various techniques, such as the Royal Academy of Dance in England (RAD), a technique that has spread through around the world most of England's historic colonies. The Checchetti and Vaganova methods are two other very entrenched and internationally known ballet techniques. Most dancers in the performing arts context have some ballet training, even if their primary training and performance technique is in modern or contemporary dance forms. In fact, despite a plethora of techniques available, ballet remains the standard training for contemporary dance performers.

Despite being conscious revisions of ballet, modern and contemporary training techniques are, in their very understanding of the logic of the human body and its movement, founded on their predecessor. The system of instruction, based on a format beginning with a careful warm up followed by increasingly complex movement sequences have been developed to exercise particular sectioned facets of the body. Contemporary and modern techniques, following ballet, have found institutional endorsement through their instruction in university dance departments.

Shay elaborates on this context, where dance is learnt in a conscious fashion from an expert, the teacher, in a studio/classroom setting. In his research on state dance ensembles, the goal of the professional dancer is to acquire a wide variety of styles and forms, so as to perform the dances of many traditions (1999, p.32).

#### **1.5.4 Consciousness**

A fourth aspect of the distinction between dance in its first and second existence, according to Hoerburger, is the degree to which the dancing is a conscious act (Nahachewsky 2001, p.18). The suggestion here is that dance in its first existence is a spontaneous occurrence, whereas dance in its second existence is a calculated re-enactment of the earlier, 'authentic' dance event. The purpose of this re-enactment is no longer solely for the enjoyment of participants. Very often the re-creation of a folk



dance on a stage is an attempt to build social value for that culture, for both the participants to feel pride in their distinct heritage and for outsiders to respect and honour the various cultures that make up a multicultural nation. For example, in Canada many immigrant groups have dance troupes that practice and perform their home Nation's dances far away from its original context and purpose. The dancing is clearly motivated by a desire to affirm cultural history and traditions.

Nahachewsky elaborates on this aspect he renames 'reflectiveness', recognizing that the participant consciousness of the historical and cultural import a dance is not necessarily an irreversible transgression. In other words, although a dance form may have at one point in time been consciously cultivated as part of a program of cultural pride, it may at a later date become so assimilated into the everyday life of a group of people that this aspect is no longer its primary purpose. The primary purpose may have become social, rather than nationalistic symbolism. Thus, a dance form may be seen to revert to a first, rather than second, existence, at least in this aspect.

### **1.5 Chapter conclusion**

Clearly there are compromises that must be made in the translocation of breaking from the vernacular to the elite context. No dance can make this transition intact. By its very definition, it must change. DeFrantz's questions along these lines are very similar to mine:

What is lost in the shift from a social form with actionable consequences – the confirmation of victory or defeat – to a repeatable form admired by a crowd? How is the power of the body or of the dance diminished in this transference? If the audience doesn't know how to "read" the dance, can the dance speak (2004, p.75)?

Making sense of these questions in order to answer them in any structured way is a challenge. In his 1987 article "Re-membering Performance", Zarrilli examines the inherent contradiction between the dynamic phenomenon of performance per se and the way in which we (scholars) often represent it as static, offering an enlightening

discussion on possible approaches to combat this tendency, all which prioritize the voices of the cultural actors involved.

The methodology elaborated on in this chapter and the categorical distinctions examined directly above are made in order to set the frame for the following chapters. While to create categories seems to fix the very fluid nature of ethnographically-derived data – the true stories of live cultural actors – it is in fact the process of change or transgression between these two (false) categories that interests me. Categories become necessary for clarity of analysis, but their limitations must be acknowledged. There will always be exceptions that help prove the rule in their rarity, the exceptions often instigated by exceptional people.

## CHAPTER 2

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT: THE EVOLUTION OF BREAKING

#### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter traces the history of the dance known as breaking or b-boying, from its beginnings in the Bronx, New York City to its global diffusion, concluding with a first attempt to trace its short existence in Montreal. It is a journey from the micro to the macro back down to the micro again, a looping of a vernacular dance, appropriated by the mass-media machine and then re-appropriated by a grassroots community and danced in a vernacular context once again. In tracing this history, attention will be given to the transitions from the participatory street dance contexts to presentational contexts.

This historical analysis is essential to the study of the specifics of the Montreal breaking community because no definitive, in depth historical analysis of breaking, either in its early days in New York City or in Montreal, has to my knowledge yet been done. It is a rich dance that deserves academic recognition. Not only is such an analysis important in order to build historical context for the information presented in the following chapters, it is also important because a sense of history within this subculture is especially valued. Breaking culture often operates as an independent subculture with only loose ties to the larger hip hop culture dominated by commercial music production. Its members are particularly conscious of retaining icons of the early days of hip hop, particularly in clothing styles and music preferences. They are

often very respectful of the originators of the dances, honouring them through invitations as guest speakers and teachers.

In fashioning a descriptive text of this history the challenge lies in distinguishing vague nostalgic romanticism from concrete testimonies and in honouring both the social factors at play and the aesthetic impulse, both of which fuelled the creation of a very distinctive and vibrant dance form. Texts prioritizing the voices of the cultural actors in question, Chang (2005), Cooper and Walta (2004) and Brewster & Broughton (2000), were used frequently to develop the American portion of this history. The Montreal portion of this history relied heavily on first-hand interviews with individuals deeply involved in the breaking and breakdance community, in particular Eugene Poku, Jessie Goldberg, David Dundas (DKC), Natasha Jean-Bart (Tash) and Johnny Walker Bien-Aimé (Skywalker). Because this is still largely an oral history, some of the following information is partial or unsubstantiated. I hope that this first attempt at the Montreal breaking history will provide a starting point for further exploration and recognition of Canada's vernacular dance pioneers<sup>19</sup>.

## **2.2 The emergence of hip hop**

Hip hop is a youth cultural phenomenon that emerged in a specific time and place. It has evolved into a multifaceted international youth culture.

### **2.2.1 Socio-cultural context**

Gang warfare in the Bronx was rampant in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The *Savage Skulls*, the *Savage Nomads*, the *Black Spades*, the *Mongols*, the *Dirty Dozens*, the *Saints*, the *Cofon Cats*; the gangs were numerous, criminal and youthful. The conflict brewed in general community disintegration, set to boil by an expressway installed in the 1960s and fostered by an epidemic of apartment fires. The South Bronx in particular appeared bombed-out and abandoned. The seven-mile stretch of

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<sup>19</sup> A detailed timeline of breaking in Montreal is available in Appendix K.

elevated highway of the Cross-Bronx Expressway cut through previously cohesive and established communities of working class Jews, Germans, Italians, Irish, and immigrants from various Caribbean islands. The uprooting caused by this construction sent white residents in an exodus to the suburbs while families of colour were left to dwell in tenement housing that quickly became slums. Profiteering landlords were reputed to set fire to their own buildings in disrespect of their own tenant populations, in order to reap insurance payouts (Rose 1994, Chang 2005). Hip hop journalist and writer Jeff Chang reports that:

[In a decade], the South Bronx had lost 43,000 housing units, the equivalent of four square blocks in a week. Thousands of vacant lots and abandoned buildings littered the borough. Between 1973 and 1977, 30,000 fires were set in the South Bronx alone. In 1975, on one long hot day in June, forty fires were set in a three hour period. These were not the fires of purifying rage that had ignited Watts or a half dozen other cities after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. These were the fires of abandonment (2005, p.15).

Hollywood-style action films such as *Assault on Precinct 13* (Carpenter 1976), *The Warriors* (Hill 1979) and *Fort Apache, the Bronx* (Petrie 1981) portrayed the Bronx of this time as a savage war zone. While obviously exaggerated, this depiction led to further social stigma and isolation for the people of this large urban neighbourhood.

### **2.2.2 Youth subculture**

As the era of youth gangs peaked, then began to wane in the early 1970s, a unique period of artistic creativity was fermenting in the ethnically diverse, economically deprived ghettos of America. A multi-faceted cultural movement was born, driven largely by black and Latino youth, fuelled in part by an ingrained consciousness of African American and Afro Caribbean artistic traditions and devices. It was also a culture very much of its time: technologically savvy and equally appropriative of mass media icons and images.

It is this mediating between tradition and innovation which is at the heart of the subaltern, marginal culture of hip hop in its early days. Early hip hop youth negotiated a compromise between the familiar and the novel, between the need to differentiate oneself from one's parents and to maintain that identification. Rose asserts this conflict by stating that:

Hip hop is a cultural form that attempts to negotiate the experiences of marginalization, brutally truncated opportunity, and oppression within the cultural imperatives of African-American and Caribbean history, identity, and community. It is the tension between the cultural fractures produced by postindustrial oppression and the binding ties of black cultural expressivity that sets the critical frame for the development of hip hop (1994, p.21).

Bronx youth in the 1970s were not only responding to socio economic conditions, they were dramatizing it through symbolic forms of resistance.

Members of a subculture will often signal their membership through a distinctive and symbolic use of style. Style is expressed through a variety of means. Friedland states:

All these interrelated communicative and expressive systems – movement, sound, visual arts, language, and attitude – are explored by young African-Americans in the pursuit of 'style.' Style is the means by which an individual progresses in the spiritual quest for aesthetic communication. The social prestige of being recognized as an artist in the culture, and in the community, can be achieved only through the cultivation of 'style' (1995, p.138-139).

Certain members of this subculture pushed particular elements further than others. There were the graffiti artists who spent countless hours working on their notebooks and on late night visits to train yards in order to monumentalize their sketches in aerosol paint. There were the DJs, who foraged for vinyl records, practiced turntable transitions and threw parties in order to test their disc spinning skills. The MCs (the Masters of Ceremonies) worked on creating clever wordplays set in rhyme. And there were the dancers, who pushed their bodies into ever more complex and acrobatic patterns of corporeal signification. These various groups of people travelled sometimes in the same circles, sometimes in only vaguely connected circles. Their

alliances changed as they aged. At first they were young and poor and living in the ghetto of North America's biggest city, forging their own sense of what was 'cool'. They had this in common. As Chang puts it:

They shared a revolutionary aesthetic. They were about unleashing youth style as an expression of the soul, unmediated by corporate money, unauthorized by the powerful, protected and enclosed by almost monastic rites, codes and orders. They sprung from kids who had been born into the shadows of the baby boom generation, who never grew up expecting the whole world to be watching (2005, p.111).

A shared link between these elements, according to Brewster and Broughton is that "... hip hop grew to be about improvisation, showmanship, enjoyment and that greatest of party feelings: living for the moment" (2000, p.229).

By 1982 this culture had been named 'hip hop' by famed DJ and *Zulu Nation* founder Afrika Bambaataa<sup>20</sup>. By today hip hop has become so globally widespread, adopted by mass-market record labels and clothing, that the statement uttered by Simard, "hip hop is popular culture" is hard to refute<sup>21</sup>. But while hip hop has gone global, the story of its origins in the Bronx is at best only partially understood.

### 2.2.3 Graffiti first

The urban ritual of 'tagging' – scrawling a stylized signature in marker on the insides of subway trains and other public spaces began well before the musical innovations of hip hop took place. Names such as Julio 204 and Taki 183 were among the first to surface. According to Chang, by 1971 full-colour contraband murals were appearing on the outer surfaces of subway cars travelling throughout New York City and its boroughs (2005, p.75). At its essence this art involves the marriage of a can of spray paint and a large outdoor surface producing a mural of cartoon or machine lettering. This was the primary appeal of graffiti; the travelling

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<sup>20</sup> The *Universal Zulu Nation* is a grassroots hip hop organization promoting the history and foundational elements of hip hop culture.

<sup>21</sup> Helen Simard, un-transcribed interview with author, Montreal, May 2004.

canvases, the complete diffusion of one's outlawed expression; the silenced having finally claimed a voice. Through the movement of trains to otherwise 'safe' neighbourhoods, the ghetto was suddenly borderless, and those that turned a blind eye to the forgotten youth of the Bronx would see something of theirs.

#### **2.2.4 The DJ innovates: The Trinity**

However, it took a musical form to create the real centre around which hip hop culture pivoted. This story begins in earnest with an epic moment at which high school student Cindy Campbell, wanting to make a bit of back-to-school spending money, organized a party in August of 1973 by renting the recreation room of her family's apartment complex. She enlisted her 19-year old brother Clive to host as DJ with a sound system borrowed from their father. Jamaican-born Clive Campbell or 'Kool Herc' (short form for Hercules, so-called because of his muscular frame) mixed his records with a different groove than the mainstream disco style of the day. He brought in the more Afro-centric rhythms of James Brown and other funk groups<sup>22</sup>. Influenced by the dancehall DJs he witnessed as a youth, he accompanied his tunes with some verbal toasting.

The rec-room parties got popular and became a monthly event, filling a void left when many discos had closed due to gang violence. But by 1973 gang members were getting into clubbing and the music scene. Again, inspired by the musical community of his homeland, Herc approximated the Jamaican 'sounds' (trucks decked with powerful sound systems to animate street parties) and took his scene into the open air. Chang recounts that:

By the summer of 1974, when Herc was playing regular parties to a loyal following, he decided to play a free party on the block. "And after the block party," [Herc] says, "we couldn't come back to the rec room" (2005, p.78).

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<sup>22</sup> Funk is an African American musical style that originated in the 1960s and is distinguished from its predecessor, Soul music, by its more complex rhythms.



Herc, in a moment that would prove decisive, observed that certain people would wait for the 'break' or rhythm section of certain particularly rocking songs to dance. The 'break' is, as Brewster & Broughton put it, "a jazz term for the part of a dance record where the melody takes a rest and the drummer cuts loose, this being the explosive, rhythmic section of a song which most appealed to the teenage show-offs" (2000, p.207). Standing to the side, arms crossed at the chest, head cocked and feet planted in the typical hip hop stance, these young men would wait for their few moments of glory. The authors continue:

The stern 'b-boy stance,' beloved of rappers even today – with shoulders curved inwards and arms folded tightly under the chin – was not so much a signal of aggression as a b-boy's way of looking cool while he waited for a break (Brewster & Broughton 2000, p.208).

When the music was right they took possession of the dance floor, impressing the crowd of peers with their flashy moves.

Kool Herc capitalized on this moment and found a way to extend the pleasure of the dance. He invented the 'break-beat deejaying style', or what he called the 'merry-go-round' by getting two copies of the same record, isolating the 'break' sections and playing them back to back, over and over again so that the dancers could really get their groove on and develop their dance, rather than having only the minute or so that they had previously. Borrowing from physics terminology, Chang describes this moment passionately:

Forget melody, chorus, songs – it was all about the groove, building it, keeping it going. Like a string theorist, Herc zeroed in on the fundamental vibrating loop at the heart of the record, the break. ... In a technique he called 'the Merry-Go-Round,' Herc began to work two copies of the same record, back-cueing a record to the beginning of the break as the other reached the end, extending a five-second breakdown into a five-minute loop of fury, a makeshift *version* excursion. Before long he had tossed most of the songs, focusing on the breaks alone. His sets drove the dancers from climax to climax on waves of churning drums (emphasis in the original 2005, p.79).

Kool Herc's sensibility towards these extreme dancers who were pushing the frontiers of physical expression created a party vibe like no other. "Herc says his

decision to try DJing came from frustration as a dancer hearing too many DJs cut records in the wrong places” (Brewster & Broughton 2000, p.210). This sensitivity, this interplay between music-maker and movement-maker forms the crux of hip hop style.

Herc was part of a new wave of ‘cool’ for the youth of the Bronx. As gangs began dissolving, DJs and breaking crews began replacing them. DJ Grandmaster Flash perfected the technology, and Afrika Bambaataa with his embracing leadership converted a style into a movement. Chang calls these men, “the three kings, the trinity of hip-hop music” (2005, p.90). While Herc sparked this new creativity, Bambaataa consciously advocated against gang violence through the *Zulu Nation*. Under the leadership of Bambaataa, one of the strongest gangs, the *Black Spades*, became the *Zulu Nation*. Now the dancers, rather than spending most of the evening in the shadows of the dance hall, standing aloof and brooding, had the time during the extended break to develop and perfect their get-downs.

### **2.2.5 The MC raps**

As Kool Herc became busy with the complex task of cueing the breaks, he invited friends to help host or MC the parties by using the microphone. Disco DJs spoke over the music in elaborate couplets, but the rhyming Herc and his associate MCs developed was clearly influenced by Herc’s Jamaican roots. Their style set the standard for this defining element of hip hop, soon to be known as ‘rap’ (Brewster & Broughton 2000, p.211). In 1979, ‘Rapper’s Delight’ became the first recorded hip hop single. “‘Rapper’s Delight’ crossed over from New York’s insular hip-hop scene to black radio, then charged up the American Top 40, and swept around the globe” (Chang 2005, p.131). The power of the word became evident as the music became known not as ‘hip hop music’ but as ‘rap music’. It was the MCs in increasingly tighter units in contrast to the ‘families’ of party posses, which included DJs, MCs, body/sound system guards and dancers, and their lyrics that became controversial and emblematic of an entire culture.

### 2.2.6 Breaking

Breaking is the true dance of hip hop. It is what evolved neck to neck with the DJ innovations – or more exactly, it is what inspired the DJ innovations. Many of the MCs and DJs that followed in the footsteps of the three Kings were first dancers. Kurtis Blow, the first major label rapper was originally a breaker, *Zulu Nation* DJ Jazzy Jay was a b-boy before mastering the turntables. DJ Grandmaster Caz states, “The natural progression from me being a b-boy and a graffiti writer was to be a DJ. I did the dancing, so let me be the one who makes people dance” (quoted in Cooper 2004, p.120). And while the music may be the widespread and recognizable element of hip hop culture today, it was in fact the dance which projected the culture of hip hop and its distinctive style into world recognition. The images of daring and almost impossible rhythmic contortions of bodies in movies such as *Flashdance* (Lyne 1983) and *Beat Street* (Lathan 1984) became appropriated by youth around the globe far faster than was the music style.

But before breaking emerged as a coherent form, there were networks of African American and Afro-Caribbean social dances, each of these drawing upon roots located in African dance. There were many modern-day, multi-cultural, multi-media influences, of varied and contested sources, from the flash tap dancing of the Nicholas Brothers and other masters, to the martial arts depicted in Bruce Lee films, to the foot-flinging dances of the Cossacks. In a process Friedland names ‘social commentary in movement play’ youth appropriated and altered movements borrowed from a plethora of sources from icons of popular culture to social attitudes (1995). Fused in mimicry and acrobatics these were developed into an urban ritual of danced challenges in a forum called the cypher – a tight circle of onlookers within which the competition took place. Breaking is a product of the melting pot of the American ghetto.

When does a dance transform from sporadic individual expression into an identifiable cohesion of movement principles? When does it crystallize into a stable

form? This question is especially difficult to pin point when discussing a vernacular dance, since by nature the tradition is in constant evolution. Before I attempt to answer this question, the following section will explore the corporeal influences that fed into the crystallization of the form now known as breaking.

## **2.3 Excavating the roots of breaking**

When looking for the roots and influences, early b-boys will invariably call upon the immediate influence of James Brown and his characteristic ‘Good Foot’ dancing in performances, live and on television, to explain the number one source of style and moves. In contrast, scholars typically look to a more distant, perhaps ‘originating’ tradition for ancient vestiges of the modern dance.

### **2.3.1 African and Afro-American social dance influences**

Robert Farris Thompson, following his work on the African movement elements in African American dance has identified moments in breaking that have parallels in dance forms of Africa and the Caribbean. For example Thompson sees the spins (head, knee, back, etc.) in breaking as similar to movements in traditional Kongo dances and again to nineteenth-century Cuban dancing, as seen in an engraving (1996, p.217). Sally Banes in an article from *Folklife Annual* in 1986 makes similar links:

[Breaking is] clearly a direct descendant of African and Afro-American dance traditions, from its format (a solo performer inside a ring), to its rhythmic structure (syncopated), to its movement vocabulary (the leg wobbles of the Charleston, the acrobatic spins of black dance from Africa to the flash acts of New York nightclubs, the mimed freezes), to its rhetorical modes (the boast and the insult), to its function (male exhibition and competition) (1994a, p.128).

Many authors have equally focused on the etymology of the word ‘break’. Thompson lists several possible historical sources:

Wherever the Kongo people came in significant numbers, you frequently found their concept of the dance performance break; in Haiti, where *cassé*

(‘break’) stands for the deliberate disruption of the beat of the drums, which throws the dancers into ecstasy, or in Cuba, where *rumba abierta* refers to the dropping out of melodic instrumentation and the taking over of the conga drums (1996, p.215).

Some feel that by remaining focused on the distant past, these scholars often make errors or omissions about more recent history. By highlighting the distant roots of the dance, proper credit is not given to the individuals that formed breaking into a distinctive dance. Breaking is portrayed as having almost spontaneously appeared, without individual cultural agency or distinctive elements.

Additionally, by making vague links to an ancient past, dance scholars do not adequately explain the nature of the transmission of these perceived remnants between generations. This leaves readers to assume that dance forms are potentially embedded in the genetic code of a particular ‘race’. This type of reasoning reflects essentialist statements such as ‘dancing is in their blood’ and ‘Africans have got rhythm.’

In his paperback instructional book on ‘breakdance’ published in 1984, Curtis Marlow puts forward a theory as to how this transmission might have occurred. He claims that in the late 1960s there was a direct exchange between West Africa and the Bronx as many professional West African performing artists settled in the Bronx, and American dance companies went to Africa to study. He asserts:

The knowledge that these dance companies gained was used in performances at public schools, dance mobiles, museums, community centers, etc. In fact, these groups saturated the South Bronx with African Dance, and sitting in the audience were the breakers of today, soaking it all up (Marlow 1984, p.13).

The parallels Marlow draws between the Fula dance from West Africa and breaking are suggestive; although such an influence has not been substantiated in any other source I have come across. However it is refreshing in that it provides a very pragmatic explanation as to how certain African elements in breaking might have appeared.

Following the Pietrobruno concept of 'lived context' discussed earlier in section 1.5.3 on Transmission, breaking fits into this description of a dance form that evolved in a 'lived context,' where the movement culture of its innovators was heavily inflected, via their parents, with Afro-Caribbean roots. Pietrobruno's example, Salsa, was created in the exchange between Afro-Americans and Hispanics living in close proximity in New York City in the 1950s and 1960s<sup>23</sup>. A decade or so later, the youth of the Bronx were largely first generation or immigrants themselves, but perhaps slightly more distanced from their Afro-Caribbean or Latino ancestry.

These youth were perhaps just that much more influenced by the increasingly pervasive media invasion through television and movies than were 'salseros' a decade before them. They were by and large not part of the longstanding African American families of Harlem, of Southern slave descent. However, the African American social dance traditions that they would have come into contact with through various media sources would likely have resonated a good deal more and been absorbed more readily by them than they did in the mainstream dominant white culture. Katrina Hazzard-Donald's exploration of what she calls the 'cyclical' nature of African American dance by finding referents in various street dances from older dances such as the Black Bottom, the Watusi and the Snakehips (in locking) and the Creep (in popping) applies very easily to those West Coast funk dances (1996, p.228). It is interesting to note that she doesn't give examples of this kind of recycling in breaking.

Certainly the power of mass media in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century cannot be underestimated. It clearly played a very large part in bringing all kinds of movement fragment ideas to the youth of hip hop – from the ancient to the more abstract. Several media sources would have transmitted this influence, but probably the most influential would have been in the television series *Soul Train* (Cornelius 1971- ),

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<sup>23</sup> Salsa is a composite of the West African rumba (via Cuba), the Cuban son and mambo, both taken up by New York Puerto Ricans. The mambo in particular was influenced by African American jazz music (Pietrobruno 2002).

called black America's *American Bandstand*. In the 1970s, *Soul Train* set the standards for African American clothing and dance style, introducing its viewers to rising comedy and musical stars such as Richard Pryor and James Brown. Most of all it featured some of the best black dancing in America on television, including the moves of James Brown.

### 2.3.2 James Brown

"James Brown, without a doubt, is the fiber, the godfather of hip-hop, from his walk to his talk, his dance to his stance," states Rennie Harris (quoted in Dixon Gottschild 2000, p.55). He is the famed Philadelphian b-boy and founder of *Rennie Harris PureMovement Dance Company*. Early breakers mimicked and elaborated on the sizzling stage moves of the great funk minister, James Brown. In particular his dancing to *The Good Foot*, released in 1969 was significant. Dance writer Sally Sommer states:

Brown's style was imitated by younger, energetic, inner-city youth. A personal variation on the be-bop or 'scat' dancing of the 1940s and 1950s, Brown's greatly admired, energetic dancing featured fast footwork, with rapidly pedaling cross-steps, punctuated by lightning-quick half-split drops to the floor (1998, p.633).

James Brown was an icon of embodied coolness for African Americans in the funk era. His performance style was a mixture of various black social dances, with a distinctive flare that was all his own. In an ode to Brown, Dixon-Gotschild writes:

Keeping abreast of the many fad dances created in the black communities, he incorporated them into his act and developed them into his own image, creating a dance that is so uniquely his own that it is simply called 'The James Brown.' It is an indescribably fast and furious combination of the slide, slop, funky chicken, mashed potato, camel walk, shimmy, applejack and quiver. ... His performance consists of a calculated combination of tightly rehearsed routines relieved by improvisation (2000, p.54).

He processed these vernacular dances and resold them in an unstoppable new package. His raw energy was in contrast to the synchronized 'vocal choreographies'

of Motown singing groups such as the *Supremes*. Many of these were choreographed by tap dancer Cholly Atkins who also incorporated older social dances into the routines, but took care to keep the dancers controlled and close to their microphones. James Brown broke away from the confines of this tradition, and in doing so created a mania of stylish, athletic movement that the youth of the Bronx adored. “It was all about ‘smooth’. Like how James used to slide across the floor and the fancy footwork and all of that” (Jazzy Jay quoted in Chang 2004, p.76-77).

### 2.3.3 *Soul Train’s Funk Styles*

Funk styles predate breaking by only a couple of years, but they surely influenced the early development of breaking as black youth across North America tried to imitate the moves they caught on TV’s *Soul Train*<sup>24</sup> and to a lesser extent the sitcom *What’s Happening!!* (Monte 1976-1979). Predating the funk styles are dance groups that performed for the *Black Panthers* and at rallies surrounding the Black Power Movement with names like the *Black Messengers* and the *Black Resurgence*. These dancers were developing a dance style based on military marching drills ‘funked up’ and put to music, a style that would evolve into the fraternity-based competition dance of Stepping, but it would also influence all funk dances (Clemente 2004).

*Soul Train* started out as a local Chicago teen dance show in the late 1960s hosted by radio DJ Don Cornelius. When it became nationally syndicated in 1971, the show moved to California, providing a performance outlet for the dance styles that are distinctively West Coast. Promoting America’s top soul and R&B hits, this show brought black popular culture into the American home when such representation was almost nonexistent. Black stars such as James Brown, Aretha Franklin and comedian

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<sup>24</sup> Not only does Dundas (interview with author, January 29, 2006) state that this was the case among his peers in Montreal in the 1970s, but this widespread phenomenon can also be seen immortalized in the 1994 semi-autobiographical movie directed by Spike Lee, *Crooklyn*.



Richard Pryor were occasional guests, but the dancers, originally known as the *Soul Train Gang*, were the standard appeal. Viewers looked not only for clues to the latest dance craze, but also for tips on dressing stylishly (Schnakenberg 2002).

### 2.3.3.1 Locking

One of the first of these dance forms to really catch on was locking. Locking was invented in 1969 by a young Black street dancer named Don Campbell, who drew on older social dances such as the Football and the Funky Chicken, modifying the controlled hydraulic movements of the Robot, and mixing it with looser and larger flash-tap-inspired movement. The characteristic flapping of elbow, wrist rolling, freezing and pointing is distinctive of locking. Campbell perfected the art of exact stop/start, collapse/freeze into shape movements, adding comical facial expressions and dressing like a funky clown – with platform shoes, loud striped socks, short pegged pants, bright colourful satin shirts and white gloves. Hazzard-Donald describes the attire:

Big apple hats (an oversized style cap popularized by the late Donny Hathaway and soon to be replaced by Kangol caps, then by baseball caps); knickers, or suspenders with baggy pants, or pants tucked into striped knee socks; open-laced combat boots (soon to be replaced by open-laced sneakers); sun visors... (1996, p.226).

In the early 1970s Campbell put together a crew of dancers he called the *Lockers*, with each member having his own style and specialties. Fluky Luke did acrobatics, the Russian splits and going on his toes, Penguin was known for his slow motion waddling step, Greg Campbellock Jr. would do flips, Shabba-doo was fast and very technical and Don Campbell's style was more jazzy. Slim the Robot, and Fred Rerun Berry (later star of TV's *What's Happening!!*) were two other members.

Toni Basil, a white female film choreographer, met and joined the *Lockers*, bringing them gigs on shows like *Soul Train* and *Saturday Night Live*. Occasionally the *Lockers* also worked other women such as Pat Davis, Damita Jo Freeman and Janet Lock and integrated them into their performance routines (Banes 1994d, p.135).

But essentially, the *Lockers* was a nightclub dance group, and confining the individualist dancers to tight, pre-planned movement routines apparently caused some strain on the troupe. According to Banes:

‘Locking’ was essentially an improvisatory, solo, competitive form, and the demands of unison dancing and rehearsing sapped its strength. The *Lockers* preferred to go out dancing at clubs over pressing the stuff into molds at rehearsals and in public performances, and their dancing went from what Basil remembers as a fine, vital madness – “everyone jumping around and freely improvising while I frantically called the cues” – to a watered-down, refined and predictable act (1994b, p.135).

Via *Soul Train* locking influenced and inspired many dancers across North America, including Montrealer Eugene Poku as well as more mainstream interests in Hollywood. Montreal street dancer Natasha Jean-Bart (b-girl Tash) sees elements of locking in the Disco dancing in the movie *Saturday Night Fever* (Badham 1977), but criticizes its execution. She states:

Every time John Travolta does his hip thing, and his pimp walk, the way he goes down, you know, with that little bounce, and the points that he does in the movie, that’s all, that’s locking, that’s just a very washed out lock<sup>25</sup>.

This demonstrates another example of the media industry whitewashing a black expressive invention.

### 2.3.3.2 Popping

Popping is said to have been created only a few years after locking developed. Pistol Pete and his brothers, members of the street dance group called the *Electric Boogaloos* take credit for inventing it in the early 1970s in Fresno, California. Other members of the crew include Bugaloo Sam, Poppin’ Pete, Puppet Boozer, Robot Dave, Ticking William, and Creepin’ Sid. Some confusion was created as locking was also known to some as the Lock-pop, leading some people to believe the styles were one and the same, which they are not. Hazzard-Donald traces popping back to a

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<sup>25</sup> Natasha Jean-Bart, interview with author, May 28, 2004.

turn-of-the century plantation dance from the Georgia Sea Islands, through vaudevillian dancer Earl Snake Hips Tucker, and then in the 1950s Midwest as Poppin' the Hips, the 1960s as the Jerk, and in the 1970s as the Robot (1998, p.263).

There are many variant styles within popping, but the essential movement is an isolated but repeated sharp flex and release of a given muscle group. It also includes the distinctive 'wave' move, which combines the jerkiness of locking and the Robot with the more smooth and controlled movement of mime, to create something that looks like an electrical current moving through the body. Other styles and moves include Ticking, Puppet, the Cobra, the King Tut, the Moonwalk and Animation. The clothing style of poppers is elegant funk: vests, ties, shirts, ultra-baggy pants and canvas round-toed shoes, all in shades from white to black.

First becoming big in San Francisco, and then Los Angeles, popping quickly made its way onto *Soul Train*, challenging the popularity of locking. In this way it also travelled to New York City and caught on among the urban youth there, as the Electric Boogie. Michael Jackson learnt (and in 1983 made famous) what became known as the Moonwalk from a *Soul Train* dancer called Cooley. What Michael Jackson was really doing was a Backslide, the actual Moonwalk being a similarly upright gliding movement, but more complex and circular<sup>26</sup>. Jackson's influence in creating an international furore for Black street dances, however, cannot be underestimated.

### 2.3.4 Mass media's influence

The specific dances just discussed were not the only influences on Bronx b-boys. Drawing sources from where they could, no motion image was left un-excavated. Breaking, like all artistic languages, is a fascinating composite of multiple and largely untraceable influences.

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<sup>26</sup> David Dundas, interview with author, Montreal, January 29, 2006.

Easier to guess are the influences on the Electric Boogie, the New York version of *Soul Train* dances. Thompson perceived ‘corporeal cubism’ derived from “jerky, badly synced Saturday-morning television cartoons” (1996, p.219). Marlowe suggests that the San Franciscan mime street performer Robert Shields might have influenced the development of the Robot and popping (1984, p.15). However, once he joined Lorene Yarnell to create the TV series couple *The Clinkers* in 1977 (Binder 1977-1978) popping had already been created<sup>27</sup>. Rose thought that some of the movement (probably referring to the Wave) “...foreshadowed the fluid and shocking effect of morphing, a visual effect made famous in *Terminator 2*” (Cameron 1991, Rose 1994, p.22). Whatever was big in the day – *Star Wars* (Lucas 1977) and space travel, martial arts films (for example *Enter the Dragon* (Clouse 1973) starring Bruce Lee & Black martial artist Jim Kelly), even the dance/fight scene in *West Side Story* (Robbins 1961) might have influenced the dance.

To look at some of the moves in breaking where the torso is vertical, centre of gravity close to the ground, and feet are moving in rapid patterns, one can’t help but be reminded of the talismanic Russian dance which most youth try to imitate. Is it not too far-fetched to think that these youth, seeing such dancing on television, might have mutated and adapted such a dance to their own needs and to their own sense of style and rhythm? On the other hand the possibility that the Brazilian art of capoeira influenced breaking has been flatly dismissed by early breakers. Friedland suggests that some of the more acrobatic moves (in the West Philadelphia neighbourhood in which she conducted her field research they called this movement ‘floor floating’ or ‘ground stepping’) likely came out of movement play embellishing on “tumbling that the kids happen to learn in school or at recreation centres, notably several variations of flips, hand stands and somersaults” (1983, p.27).

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<sup>27</sup> The TV series might still have provided a model for NYC youth in their adoption of the Electric Boogie.

Friedland discusses the relationship between media's influence and the invention of movement by youth in her examination of disco, but the same could be said of breaking:

Disco is a multi-media phenomenon, depending not only on the direct contact of social relationships but information and services transmitted by different forms of mass media. [...] Every day, networks of media and entertainment industry ideas are negotiated and guided out to the public at large. These negotiations involve interplay between national and local television, the recording industry and local radio, local radio and the public, and then several levels of inter- and intra-community relationships. Popular images of disco are a conglomerate of data from these myriad sources (1983, p.27).

Although this inspirational transmission of media images was distinctly not visceral in one-to-one contact, it was imprinted and owned by the dancers in a process that is arguably very post-modern. To try to pin them all down would be futile, as style was personal and fleeting. Chang states the myriad of influences he perceives in early breaking, some potentially accurate, others his own interpretation:

Each time a b-boy or a b-girl stepped in the cipher<sup>28</sup>, they wrote their own generational narrative. Starting upright in the top-rock, hands up and stabbing like a gang-member in motion, feet moving side to side like Ali in a rope-a-dope, dropping down like James Brown, turning hurricanes of Spy's boricua footwork, exploding into a Zulu freeze, tossing a spin and punctuating it all with a Bruce Lee grin or a mocking Maori tongue – the entire history of the hip-hop body in a virtuoso display of style (2005, p.118).

Through breaking, youth encrypt a myriad of conflicting influences, finally to express a coherent and personalized statement of assertive presence in the world. The large and dangerous movement is a way to take up space and claim entitlement in a dispossessed world. It is a way to be recognized for having taken that challenge, and

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<sup>28</sup> The area surrounded by onlookers in which a breaker freestyles or improvises. Although orthographically wrong, cypher is more commonly spelt with a 'y' in this context, although either spelling is used.

for signing it with a unique and individual flair.

## **2.4 Breaking in New York City**

Before it became a crystallized form, the breakers' dancing consisted of individualistic explorations in movement style. Directly preceding breaking was a dance called Rocking, which eventually became incorporated as just one element of breaking.

### **2.4.1 Rocking**

In the post-gang era of the early 1970s, the youth scene began to be about style and getting down, rather than about getting back. At early Kool Herc parties, dancers were too energetic and idiosyncratic to conform to established social dances like the Hustle, which required group conformity. Dances at this time were even more individual than what came before and what evolved out of them. Style and finesse rather than acrobatics were valued. Various dances came and went, some with names, some without.

For a brief time there was Boyoing, where a dancer wore a hat with a pom-pom, stretching and shaking his body in order to make the ball wiggle back and forth. Another they called the Cork-and-screw, described by early b-boy Doze: "It's 'cause they used to spin down, pop up, do a split and then go whoop! Come up, and then go down again into a split into a few baby-rocks into a little baby freeze" (quoted in Chang 2005, p.81). B-boy Crazy Legs describes a dance he remembers from the Edenwald Projects in the Bronx in the early 1970s in which 'outlaws' as he put it were dancing with radios on their shoulders:

The dance is actually very long. It's like a fifteen-minute dance. It has a lot of steps. It goes from a format of standing up and being still and kinda like out doing with the hand gestures, then it goes to a strut, like a skip, then to a strut, then a backwards step and then it goes into a forward step, and then it's like a hesitate, and then you drop (quoted in Chang 2005, p.138).

The last section (backwards step, forward step, hesitate, and drop), Ken and Doze of *Rock Steady* crew mastered and evolved into the uprocks around the beginning of the next decade. Mr. Wiggles' *Hip hop timeline* (Clemente 2004) identifies two kids from Brooklyn, with the names of Rubberband and Apache, crediting them for bringing the gang dance known as rocking or the Brooklyn Rock into the city discos around 1968.

This eventually evolved and settled into a relatively stable dance called rocking, uprocks or the rock dance. This was a mainly upright dance that relied on fast footwork and vulgar gestures for its effect. King Uprock remembers that:

Before it was called breaking or b-boying, they called it the 'rock dance.' A lot of guys, like rockers from Queens, came down because they expected heavy metal. We told them, 'No, this is rocking, a dance.' A lot of people came and said, 'Let me see how you up-rock.' That was lingo on the street, so we left it like that. From then on, we called it up-rock competition, but the original name from the gangs was the 'rock dance' (quoted in Cooper 2004, p.102).

Outdoor jams brought what was previously a more private dance out into the open, which meant performing right on the concrete – getting bruised and scratched from broken glass. With gangs losing their control over cross-district fraternizing, the 'bedroom b-boys' were finally free to move about, finding opportunities to hone their skills and compete with kids of other neighbourhoods. Rather than in gangs, the dancers associated in crews, and 'battled' their dance as crews. It is still not clear whether in these early days if rivaling groups battled in lines, as can be seen in the movie *Wild Style* (Ahearn 1982), or one at a time within a circle of onlookers, as it is more often described.

Rocking movement was distinctly related to gang warfare: rocking involved mimicking violent motions such as stabbing, punching, jiggling. "Uprock was martial posing. Uprock meant battle mime. It was danced combat, a fight with steps instead of fists. One basic sequence: hop, step, *lunge*" (Thompson 1996, p.216). Winning gangs won the right to choose where the next rumble would take place. The *Zulu*

*King* dancers included Zambu Lanier, Kusa Stokes, Ahmad Henderson, Shaka Reed, Aziz Jackson. Other dancers remembered include Tricksy, Wallace Dee, the Amazing Bobo, Sau Sau, Charlie Rock, Norm Rockwell, Eldorado Mike, and Keith and Kevin, the *Nigger Twins* (Chang 2005, p.116).

#### **2.4.2 Breaking: Puerto Ricans innovate**

In the mid-1970s the demographics of the b-boy crews began to change. Up until that point the dance was dominated by African Americans. But as the Black youth gradually aged out of their teen years, they began to see breaking as a fad, and moved on to other interests. The Puerto Rican youth of the Bronx took up breaking. In all likelihood the cross-over of hip hop to the Puerto Rican community was due largely to a DJ named Charlie Chase (Flores 2000, p.3; Hager 1984, p.81). The Hispanics breathed new life into the dance, both in enthusiasm and style, as their cultural heritage embellished the dance with new moves. Robert Farris Thompson (1996, p.218) suggests that the entry steps to breaking were highly influenced by a Puerto Rican dance called the Bbomba<sup>29</sup>. Spins did exist previous to this time, but the Puerto Ricans pushed the spinning element to new heights by finding new pivot points, most notably the head, and in numerous other ways. A variation on the backspin was developed called the windmill where the legs flared; a whirling one-arm handstand was called the 1990; and routines involving two or more dancers were created, with moves such as the helicopter, where two dancers are spun by a third as if the revolving blades of the aircraft. Ever more challenging freezes were also developed. These are moments of frozen time where the body is placed in a precarious position, close to the ground and with minimal points of support, often upside down and invariably taunting an opponent.

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<sup>29</sup> Thompson credits this observation to hip hop scholar David Sternbach. Thompson's article strangely does not contain any references and I have not managed to locate any writing by David Sternbach (or even to confirm that he exists).



Crews such as the *Rockwell Association*, *The Disco Kids (TDK)*; the *Apache Crew* and *Starchild La Rock* formed. A Catholic church located on 182<sup>nd</sup> Street and Crotona Avenue called Saint Martin's, began sponsoring breaking battles in their gymnasium with the local priests acting as judges. After a decisive final battle at the church in the summer of 1979 the Puerto Rican dancers started moving on in their turn to other things (Hager 1984, p.83). Jimmy Dee was president of the original *Rock Steady* crew from Echo Park, then called the *Untouchable 4 B-boys*, with members Easy Mike, P-Body 170 (later known as Jimmy Lee) and Joe-Joe. Sensing that breaking was dying out and needed young blood to stay alive, he granted 14-year-old Ritchie Colon membership to *Rock Steady*. Only two years earlier Colon had attended his very first schoolyard breaking jam. At 12 years old he had battled and lost to *Rock Steady*.

Colon had in the meantime developed his skills and, upon his acceptance to the crew, adopted the name Crazy Legs. Shortly after, his family moved away from the heart of breaking in the Bronx to Upper Manhattan. But Crazy Legs didn't leave the dance behind. For a time Legs would commute on weekends to the Bronx, battling with the crew as practice, but eventually this became costly, and moreover pointless, as fewer kids cared to dance. He states, "a lot of b-boys were locked down, for stick-ups, murders or just getting regular jobs. Retirement age for a b-boy back then was 16-17 years old" (quoted in Israel 2002).

Crazy Legs therefore went on a mission. Chang calls him a 'pre-teen preservationist', who, "like a character in one of the Times Square kung-fu flicks he loved, he travelled through the city to find and challenge every remaining b-boy" (2005, p.137). With his cousin Lenny Len, he scoured the city to battle and then recruit fellow dancers of the dying form. Crazy Legs finally found b-boys to battle against at the playground at the corner of 98<sup>th</sup> Street and Amsterdam Avenue in the P.S. 163 playground, in Manhattan. There he met Ty Fly, Mania and Take 1, and gathered wayward members from forgotten crews such as *Zulu King* dancer Wayne Frosty Freeze Frost of the *Rock City Rockers*, and Jeffrey Doze Green and Ken Swift

Gabbert of the *Young City Boys*. With all of this work under his belt, Jimmy Dee handed Crazy Legs the title of leader of the *Rock Steady* crew leader in 1981.

This playground was eventually named Rock Steady Park, for the part it played in bringing breaking back to life. There, the kids removed the swings because the spongy, rubberized surface that was underneath them was perfect for breaking. Doze remembers, “We could do crazy moves without breaking our necks. We practiced our moves and shit and perfected it on that. Then we took it to the streets” (quoted in Cooper 2004, p.88). But in the heat of the summer the rubber was too hot, so they dumpster-dived cardboard boxes from furniture and appliance stores to dance on instead.

At this point breaking had fully crystallized into the dance form today’s dancers consider the foundations of the dance. While it has evolved and developed over the years since these early times, it remains one dance with its roots firmly planted here. Please see Figure 2.1 on the following page for a schematic overview of the evolution that brought breaking to this point.

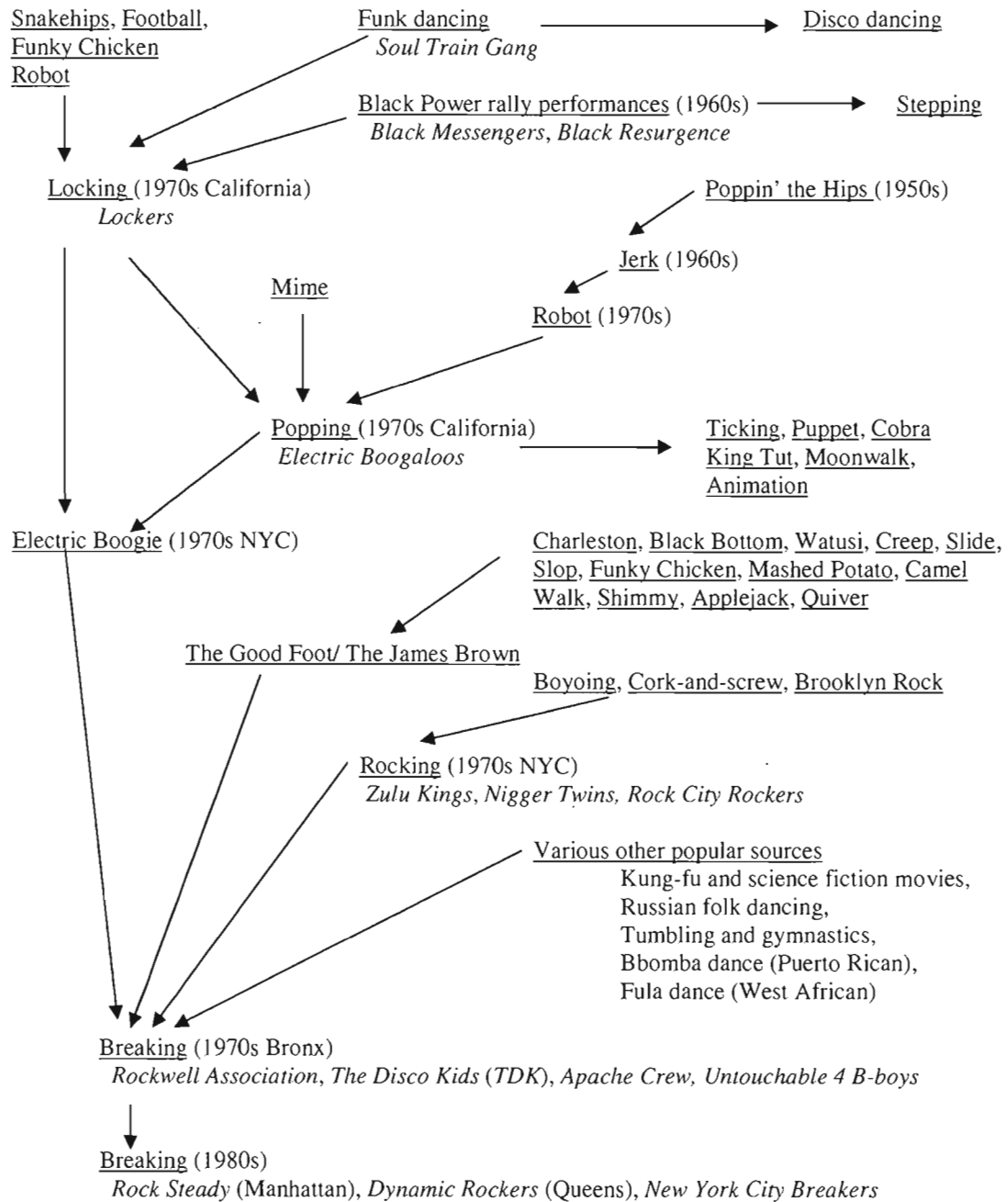


Figure 2.1 Genealogy of Breaking

### 2.4.3 The downtown scene

Various intersecting individuals and interests led to the 'discovery' of breaking by mainstream America in the early 1980s. At this point some members of the downtown arts scene, into post-modern art creation, had begun seeing hip hop as a manifestation of avant-garde culture. Already in 1972 graffitist Phase 2 displayed his pieces at the United Graffiti Artist's Rozor Gallery show and in 1973 post-modern choreographer Twyla Tharp used a graffiti backdrop for a *Joffrey Ballet* premiere of her *Deuce Coupe* piece.

In the late 1970s an intrepid young photographer named Martha Cooper, who worked for the *New York Post*, shot pictures in her spare time and with her leftover film of inner city youth at play. She was increasingly interested in the graffiti works she saw and photographed and eventually developed friendships with some of the youth responsible for the train car masterpieces. Meanwhile downtown sculptor Harry Chalfant, like Cooper, had been befriending graffiti artists and photographing their art as it appeared on city trains and building walls. Chalfant had opened his Greenwich Village studio to the youth graffitists from the Writer's Bench at 149<sup>th</sup> Street, an underground graffiti organization. His documentary photos became the source for youth trying to develop their style, as they would study his photos of more accomplished illicit muralists. Chalfant first displayed his photos at the O.K. Harris gallery in SoHo in September 1980 (Cooper 2004, p.76).

On January 21<sup>st</sup>, 1980, Cooper was summoned by her employer down to the Washington Heights subway station in order to capture a 'youth riot' on film as a news item. It was true that small weapons had been confiscated, but rather than rioting, the youth had been dancing. It was the *High Times* crew, a gang with members as young as 10 years old, who battled each other by dancing for each other's T-shirts. The police were confused and dropped their charges, the newspaper lost interest, but Cooper was intrigued. Sensing there was a valid story behind this surprising dance phenomenon, but knowing that writing was not her forte, Cooper contacted Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Folklorist and professor at the Performance

Studies department of New York University. She in turn put Cooper in touch with Sally Banes, dance writer and historian, PhD candidate and dance critic at the SoHo News. Together Banes and Cooper searched the uptown neighbourhood for the better part of a year, wishing to collaborate on a piece, but were unable to contact the protagonists of the story. When they did encounter the same youth again, the kids insisted that breaking was 'out' and roller disco was 'in'. And besides, their parents had gotten mad at them for being arrested (Cooper 2004, p.70-73).

Around this time Cooper and Chalfant met for the first time. When he, at Cooper's suggestion, asked among his young graffiti friends about breaking, the *Rock Steady* crew suddenly materialized, Crazy Legs at the helm, ready to demonstrate their art. This was a big relief to Banes and Cooper, who had signed up to present their 'discovery' at the Bronx Folklore Conference that spring, even before they had located any kids who could demonstrate the dance (Cooper 2004, p.70-73).

Inspired by this expression of teenage virility, Chalfant decided to include breaking in a show he was putting together. He had been invited by a SoHo gallery/performance space called the Common Ground to display his graffiti photographs. The show, set for May 3, 1981, included slides of Chalfant's photos of graffiti on subway cars, music by MCs Fab 5 Freddy and Rammellzee and DJ Mighty Mike<sup>30</sup>. With the *Rock Steady* crew performing breaking, all four elements of the culture were present. They called the show *Graffiti Rock*, as the term hip hop was not yet common.

It was to be a staged battle: *Rock Steady* (Crazy Legs, Take 1, Kippy Dee, and Little Crazy Legs) against the fictional *Breakmasters* (Frosty Freeze, Mr. Freeze, Ken Swift and Ty Fly.) Take 1, Cooper and Chalfant went out to buy t-shirts – half red, half blue, each with their names ironed-on to the front. During rehearsals for the Common Ground show Banes did her interviews for the keystone *Village Voice* article "To the Beat Y'all: Breaking is Hard to Do" (1981). Ironically the show itself

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<sup>30</sup> According to Banes (1994a), Fab 5 was the DJ with no mention of Mighty Mike.

never occurred due to a rival gang threatening to disrupt it. The *Ballbusters* (a tough Dominican gang from Washington Heights) came down to fight on the Saturday dress rehearsal. When the Graffiti Rock DJs responded by pulling out machetes in order to protect their sound system, it was clear that the show would be cancelled (Cooper 2004, p.76-79).

Banes later said, “Our faith in what one breakdancer had told us – that breakdancing had replaced fighting among street kids – was shaken” (1994a, p.129). Breakers were notorious for getting into fights, especially when the dance battles got heated. None-the-less, Banes’ quote of Tee saying, “In the summer of ’78, when you got mad at someone, instead of saying ‘Hey man, you want to fight? You’d say, ‘Hey, man, you want to rock?’” appeared highlighted in the *Village Voice* article. Hager suggests that this statement gave breaking an appealing profile that could be supported by the national press. This was support that graffiti and rap music had been unable to win:

It was just the sort of quote that makes good newspaper copy. When the article appeared there were only a handful of breakers left in the city, but within months television camera crews, reporters and independent filmmakers were scouring the city in search of more. The attention lavished on the dancers allowed graffiti writers and rappers to get media exposure as well (Hager 1984, p.87).

Two weeks later the Folklore conference was held, and *Rock Steady* animated demonstrations and discussions while Cooper showed slides of the photographs she had taken of them. Banes presented an academic paper. A few weeks after that the crew was filmed battling another crew from Queens called the *Dynamic Rockers*. This was a key scene in the documentary film exploring graffiti art directed by Henry Chalfant and Tony Silver in 1983 called *Style Wars* (Cooper 2004, p.82-83).

At this point Chalfant was acting as the crew’s de-facto manager, arranging gigs and helping them cart their sheet of linoleum. That summer Chalfant was contacted to organize an exhibition of breaking in downtown Manhattan for a festival called *Lincoln Center Out of Doors*. He decided to restage the battle between the *Dynamic*

*Rockers* and the *Rock Steady* crew. This was a rather high-profile event, which drew the uninitiated as well as ghetto-insiders. The two crews went head to head with their respective neighbourhood fan sections forming a tight circle around the action. The seated audience couldn't see the battle. The competition was intense and it was difficult to proclaim a winner, each side claiming victory. Fights and a bit of vandalism resulted. Chalfant remembers that, "The guy who asked me to organize the show was not very happy. I should have known better, but I didn't. I didn't think that it was going to be like a gang war, which is what it turned out to be" (quoted in Cooper 2004, p.93).

Other appearances made for better press, as a building momentum of breaking across the city occurred. As the visibility of the dance grew, so did the number of their disciples. More and more crews formed, taking to downtown streets with their portable stereos ('ghetto blasters') playing hip hop mixed tapes, to perform for money in a hat, and getting gigs for events small and large, both live and filmed. From spectacular to intimate, breakers performed on stages such as the fortieth anniversary gala of City Center, the experimental performance stage at the Kitchen in SoHo, and community stages such as bar mitzvahs.

In 1981 British punk music promoter Malcolm McLaren hired *Rock Steady* crew and Afrika Bambaataa and his posse of MCs and DJs to perform the opening act for the *Bow Wow Wow* pop/punk music concert (Brewster & Boughton 2000, p.248). Crazy Legs had never before met Bambaataa, the icon of hip hop, and was finally able to ask for (and was granted) membership into the *Zulu Nation*. After that, *Rock Steady* began performing regularly at a new hip hop night at the Negril, an intimate reggae club in the East Village frequented by some of New York's art crowd, hosted by Michael Holman and Ruza Blue (a.k.a. Cool Lady Blue). The hip hop night moved for a brief time to another nightclub called the Trasheteria, and then to the spacious Roxy, a converted roller-skating rink. Other breaking nightclubs were the Ritz and The Fun House. By all accounts the Roxy nights were a unique moment in the history of the New York clubbing scene, where youth of diverse nationalities and styles came

together to party in relative harmony. It was a very special party scene that not only brought the uptown and downtown scenes together, but also prioritized the DJ and the dancing rather than the MC.

Ruza Blue became *Rock Steady's* manager. The Roxy hired professionally trained choreographers such as (jazz-dance trained) Rosanne Hoare and Julie Fraad to help develop the *Rock Steady* crew and other breaking and electric boogie groups' routines. Breakers would go to Roxy nights with the intention of being seen by talent scouts and getting other gigs. Contests for cash prizes were organized and judged not by their peers but by outsiders (Banes 1994a, p.132). The 'professional' gigs brought the dancers money and fame. The *Furious Rockers* performed on Gene Kelly's documentary film *That's Dancing* (1985) and on NBC's *Today* show; Scrambling Feet performed on the NBC soap opera *Another World*, and *Magnificent Force* appeared on Canadian television commercials (Rosenwald 1984). The *Rock Steady* crew, always at the forefront, appeared in several movies, commercials, and on an international tour.

#### **2.4.4 Breaking on screen**

Breaking was not only adapting itself to the concert stage, and the needs of a live passive audience, but also to the camera lens and the virtual audience beyond it. Beginning with the independent film *Wild Style* (Ahearn 1982), followed by the documentary *Style Wars* (Chalfant & Silver 1983), breaking made its way into more and more substantial silver screen appearances. Of the narrative films, Charles Ahearn's drama *Wild Style* (1983), about a graffiti artist encountering the downtown arts scene but featuring dancing by the *Rock Steady* crew, is now considered truest to reality. The 1983 movie *Flashdance* directed by Adrian Lyne included a short scene



in which members of *Rock Steady* crew dance on a street corner<sup>31</sup>. *Beat Street* (Lathan), a big-budget hip hop film produced by Harry Belafonte was released in 1984. This included a spontaneous-looking battle between *Rock Steady* crew and the *New York City Breakers* at the Roxy, as well as a highly choreographed one in a subway station.

*Breakin'* (Silberg) and *Breakin' 2: Electric Boogaloo* (Firstenberg), both out in 1984, were Hollywood productions starring West Coast funk dancers Adolfo Shabadoo Quinones from the *Lockers* and Michael Boogaloo Shrimp Chambers, a popper from the *Electric Boogaloos*. The lead title was therefore very misleading, as the small amount of actual breaking the two funk dancers did had been learnt quickly, both through the earlier movies (and other TV appearances) and through a short meeting with several members of the *Rock Steady* crew while in New York City on tour dancing for R&B singer/songwriter Lionel Richie (Clemente 2004).

In 1984 several instructional videos were also released, indicators of the trend that was sweeping the nation: *Breaking with the Mighty Poppalots*; *Let's Break*; *Breakin' in the USA & Breakdance/You Can Do It!* (Banes 1994d). Paperback equivalents included *Break dancing* (Marlow 1984); *Breakdancing by Mr. Fresh and the Supreme Rockers* (Elfman 1984); and *Hip hop: the illustrated history of break dancing, rap music, and graffiti* (Hager 1985). Classes started in urban centres across the continent as a cross-section of people attempted to learn the dances – even white suburban housewives tried learning it. Other nationally (and internationally) broadcasted productions included the *New York City Breakers* performing in front of President Reagan at a Kennedy Center Honors in Washington DC in 1983 and the one hundred dancers at the 1984 LA Olympic closing ceremonies. Breakers were even on the cover of *Newsweek Magazine* in 1984. This era of media exposure remains significant in the popularization and identification of hip hop and breaking

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<sup>31</sup> Crazy Legs also doubled Jennifer Beals' jazz dance double Marine Jahan for the audition-clincher back spin in the final scene.

culture globally.

These golden opportunities to perform for film, advertising contracts for Burger King, Pepsi-cola and clothing, as well as moments on music videos were embraced by the dancers. These youth, largely from economically disadvantaged families, were not about to refuse opportunities for money and glory. In doing so the popular media exploded and exploited the form to distend it, according to some, beyond its natural form.

#### **2.4.5 Academic criticism**

Many dance writers in this period were wary of this 'telescopic' ascent to fame, wondering, "... just as disco peaked and waned in the 1970s, will break dancing, a product of the 1980s, lose its spontaneity, its excitement, and its natural craziness as it becomes commercialized and exploited?" (Rosenwald 1984, p.74). Sally Banes, in several articles, worried over the transition from circle and street to stage and celluloid (1994a, b, c & d). She saw these changes as moving breaking away from the 'authentic' street or folk culture and the social imperatives and raw expression of a ghetto dance.

These concerns cannot be downplayed. As breakers took to the concert stage a profound change in the dance became inevitable as frontality and planned composition were born. Banes recalls an instance following the filming of the *Rock Steady* crew battling the *Dynamic Rockers* for the documentary film *Style Wars* (Chalfant & Silver 1983) in an article written in 1986:

The logistical needs of the film crew created yet more stylistic changes in the dance form. For example, the man who ran the roller rink kept telling the kids to open up the circle to give the cameraman room. The next time we saw breakdancing in the park – by now people were jamming in parks again – we happened to run into Rock Steady. Crazy Legs, by now president of the crew, was walking along the edge of the circle telling everyone to open up the circle (1994a, p.130).

Additionally, with the explosion in popularity of the dance, novices taking up the dance along with much of the media were confusing breaking with the electric boogie. All Black street dancing became subsumed under the name 'breakdancing', and in fact the boundaries between the forms were becoming much more fluid. 'Outsiders' such as the jazz-trained coaches Hoare and Fraad as well as Broadway choreographer Lester Wilson, who worked with the *Rock Steady* crew and the *New York City Breakers* on the film *Beat Street* (Lathan 1984), also consciously modified breaking movement as they looked for ways to make it more readable by a mainstream viewing audience. Wilson states, "to choreograph this film, I had to study their movements closely, see how they could be captured by the camera – adding a turn, an arm, a stop – show them how they could take their own movements further" (quoted in Grubb 1984a, p.78). Clearly Wilson was not so interested in accurately reproducing the movement and figures for the film, but in altering the dance, 'improving' the dance according to his own artistic sensibilities.

However, this academic acknowledgement of a very key change in the dance is often paired with an assumption that this 'folk' culture is critically threatened by change, and that this change was responsible for killing the dance outright. Katrina Hazzard-Donald states such a position in her article on dance in hip hop culture:

Breaking's introduction to the general public by the mass media in April 1981 surely marked the beginning of its decline as a functional apparatus for competitive challenge among rival groups or individuals. Breakdancers began rehearsing in order to be discovered and appear in movies or for competitive street exhibition rather than practicing to compete with a rival... it loses its thrust, its *raison d'être*. Movement into the mainstream negated its status as countercultural by redefining it from a subcultural form to one widely accepted and imitated, a move that inadvertently linked breakers with the society that had previously excluded them (1996, p.226-227).

Similarly, Banes concludes in her entry on 'Break dance' in the *International Encyclopedia of Dance*:

As breaking moved from the streets to the clubs and concert halls, its form and meaning changed. It was transformed from a folk form to a theatrical one. Performances stressed acrobatic transitions and de-emphasized the freeze;

various other dances were incorporated into pure breaking, and the routines were choreographed. The age and skill of professional break dancers increased. While the dance gained theatrical brilliance, it lost much of its original urgency and vitality, as well the richness of its social meaning. By the 1990s, it had all but disappeared (1998, p.538).

The possibility that the dance and dancers have embraced this change, or that the vernacular existence of the dance might remain despite a theatrical existence, what Shay calls 'parallel traditions', are not acknowledged.

In fact, the dance has arguably too short a history to consider its form sacrosanct. Like all contemporary art forms, it evolves and adapts as the need arises. DJ and graffiti artist Fab 5 Freddy, for example, saw hip hop as an art movement and not as a folk culture. He states that he was "serious about trying to be a painter, and I wanted this graffiti movement to be seen as a serious movement like Futurism or Dada. I didn't want us to be looked on as folk artists" (quoted in Brewster & Broughton 2000, p.253). Admittedly, the public visibility of breaking likely "arrested the vernacular process of development and change, freezing breaking – as a performance genre – in a media-made time warp" (Friedland 1983, p.28), at least for some time.

Other very concrete negative repercussions of the commercialization and fad-like treatment by the mass media machine were faced by the dancers who lived and breathed breaking. Once superstars, breakers were dropped like old shoes the minute public interest moved on to other things. Mainstream dismissal of breaking and its brutal disappearance from the media scene was a harsh pill for youth who had nothing to go back to but poverty and crime. Crazy Legs remembers,

One minute we were in the limelight... everything was straight, traveling all over the world, get in front of the line of a club we helped build, in terms of reputation, and the next thing you know it's like – 'go to the back of the line!' Boom! How do you really nurture someone for this industry, and prepare them for what can happen? Especially someone from the ghetto... From that to having all this money, loot in your pocket, getting all your boys high, having honeys, to the next thing just having the rug pulled out from under you. Yo, I went through an identity crisis (quoted in Israel 2002).

It was as if breaking had a lifespan, and the lifespan had been short. While some dancers benefited economically from this boom, most were exploited for their skills and not given the tools to continue to develop. As the marketing elements of hip hop culture began to overtake the actual participants, the dancing faded in importance. In a mass American society that needs to 'possess', what was consumable became more dominant - the music and the clothes.

Rap became the medium frontliner, able to communicate through words a powerful message of youthful rebellion<sup>32</sup>. Chang states:

Rap proved to be the ideal form to commodify hip-hop culture. It was endlessly novel, reproducible, malleable, perfectible. Records got shorter, raps more concise and tailored to pop-song structures. Rap groups shrank, from the Furious Five and the Funky 4 + 1 More down to the Treacherous Three, and now, to duos like Cash Money and Marvelous or Eric B. and Rakim (2005, p.228).

But the stagnation of the 'time-warp' was relatively short-lived. By 1998, when Banes' rather eulogy-like entry was published, breaking was in fact undergoing a massive revival as a socially enacted vernacular dance with a very strong underground following.

#### **2.4.6 Going global**

While the instant fame given to breaking in the mid-eighties by the massive media exposure might have led to its 'crash and burn' disappearance from public sight, what it did allow for was the dissemination of hip hop culture world-wide. It seems clear now that the dances of hip hop were at the vanguard of the global advance of this underground style culture. Often the creation and recording of rap

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<sup>32</sup> In their book *Jazz Dance*, the Stearns assert that commodification of African American artistry and its relegation to the entertainment industry is at least as old as the turn of the century Minstrelsy tradition, a song and dance parody of African Americans. Performing in 'blackface' and reenacting the derogatory stereotypes was, until the 1930s, the only way for African Americans to make a professional living in the performing arts (1968).

groups is noted as a first official manifestation of a localized hip hop activity, when in fact the activity of dancing, either street battling in crews or performing, invariably came before the home-grown music scene. The hip hop dance styles in films such as *Flashdance* (Lyne 1983), *Beat Street* (Lathan 1984) or *Breakin'* (Silberg 1984, Firstenberg 1984) on commercials, music videos, on *Soul Train* and in live tours created immediate visible recognition and identification among youth around the globe. Sociologist and hip hop scholar Myriam Laabidi states:

It was like a universal effect, that hip hop was implanted, whether we are talking about France or Canada or in other countries that welcomed this culture, by the dance. It's practically a law, I don't know why. And especially through the movies of the 1980s, where there were little bits of break dance. That was really the medium that introduced this art form (FTBA)<sup>33</sup>.

Hip hop dance communities sprung up in Montreal and other cities across Canada, in France and Belgium, England, Germany, Japan, New Zealand, and elsewhere. The breakdance scene in France was initiated by all accounts through a DJ and dancer named Sydney and his TV show *H.I.P H.O.P* in 1985 (K 2005a, p.31 and Pastori 1984). In 1984 the paperback *Breakdancing by Mr. Fresh and the Supreme Rockers* (Elfman) was published in English and translated into French for publication in Europe (Elfman 1984). A paperback called *Breakdance* was published in Toronto the same year (Nadell and Small 1984). While these books are now seen to be poor representations of breaking<sup>34</sup>, they none-the-less demonstrate that there was enough local interest in the dance to warrant attention from a publisher.

Certainly the imported form was not breaking, but the mutant form 'breakdance', a combination of the Bronx dance and the West Coast funk dances. And with

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<sup>33</sup> "C'était comme un effet universel. Le hip hop s'était implanté, que ce soit en France, ou au Canada ou dans d'autres pays qui ont accueilli cette culture-là, par la danse. C'est presque une loi, je ne sais pas pourquoi. Et surtout à travers la vague cinématographique qu'il y a eu dans les années 80, où il y a eu des petits 'morceaux' de break dance, ça a vraiment été le médium qui l'a introduit." Myriam Laabidi, un-transcribed interview with author, January 27, 2006.

<sup>34</sup> David Dundas, interview with author, Montreal, January 29, 2006.

breaking (via breakdance) reaching star status, so too were the west coast funk street dance forms achieving mainstream exposure, albeit in confused fashion, largely through the dancing of Michael Jackson, both solo and previously with the *Jackson 5* group.

By 1981 the first cable programs to showcase music videos were launched. The program *Night Flight* (Shapiro 1981-1988) was the first, airing overnight on weekends. Close on its heels came the MTV network station, playing 24 hours of non-stop music videos. Suddenly dance reached a new level of visibility as youth were able to watch and learn the latest new dance moves right in their own homes. Soon after Michael Jackson's best-selling album *Thriller* was released in 1982, three of its seven singles (Billie Jean, Beat It and Thriller) were made into music videos, revolutionizing the genre and breaking the unofficial colour-code on MTV. During a television special in 1983 commemorating Motown's twenty-fifth year of existence called *Motown 25: Yesterday, Today, Forever* (de Passe 1983), Michael Jackson sang Billie Jean and performed a tightly choreographed dance routine, mesmerizing audiences as far away as Montreal<sup>35</sup>. All of this media exposure on Black youth dance styles inspired kids around the world to imitate, emulate, to move. Accurate naming – it was called the Electric Boogie in New York, Le Smurf in France – wasn't of highest importance.

In Montreal hip hop culture and Black vernacular street dances initially took off among ethnic-minority and lower-income youth. Black youth in Canada and the US shared a similar enough cultural heritage, a sensibility towards the Africanist aesthetics inherent in breaking, that it 'made sense' to them. Elsewhere the young people that took up breaking were largely of African or Caribbean origin, although not entirely. But this inherent cultural affinity can hardly apply to the youth in Japan, Germany and New Zealand that took up street dancing. It was more likely the

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<sup>35</sup> Natasha Jean-Bart, interview with author, Montreal, May 28, 2004.

rebellious style of the breakers that dispossessed youth across the globe identified and allied themselves with. Chang states:

[Early hip hop youth] shared a revolutionary aesthetic. They were about unleashing youth style as an expression of the soul, unmediated by corporate money, unauthorized by the powerful, protected and enclosed by almost monastic rites, codes and orders. They sprung from kids who had been born into the shadows of the baby boom generation, who never grew up expecting the whole world to be watching (2005, p.111).

The transgressive nature of a physically extreme dance form and assertively youthful musical style resonated with oppressed youth around the world. Whether this oppression was based on class or race or age, the dance counterculture struck a chord. Hip hop scholar Halifu Osumare asserts, "Hip hop's connective marginalities are social resonances between black expressive culture within its contextual political history and similar dynamics in other nations" (2001, p.172).

Over time many dancers sought out the expertise of some of the first breakers (called Original Generation or OG) and corrected certain movement mistakes made in the transition to film and back to flesh, so that the 'breakdance' originally learned, evolved to and could be more properly called the 'breaking' of the original form. International breakers now may be able to enter the cypher and speak the same movement language. Distinct nationalities often have their own flavour or 'dialect' as each community that took up the dance also slightly modified it to suit their own aesthetic sensibilities. This creative consumption – the naturalizing of media images in order to create an underground culture – operates as a reversal of the co-opting of breaking for mass-media consumption.

Once introduced to hip hop culture through the dancing, youth in these countries were perhaps then better able to process, understand, and attempt to reproduce the music of hip hop, rather as many of the early DJs were themselves self-identified dancers before they took to the turntables.



## 2.5 Breaking in Montreal

This historical account switches gears as we move from a relatively removed history to one that is much closer in time and space to the author. The following account is still an embryonic history, a bit of a who's who of the Montreal breaking story necessary in order to create context for the subsequent chapters. There is very little analysis as the events are so immediate. The observations stem from my direct research and interviews with Montreal dancers. It is a partial history, based on the limited resources available to me as a novice ethno-historian. As a young history, information has been sporadic and incomplete. It is largely an oral history of an undisciplined culture, of people who understandably perhaps find the academic analysis of their culture at worst, suspect, and at best low on their list of priorities. This text none-the-less represents a first attempt at such a recording of the local history of breaking. Hopefully it will provide a building block for others or myself to improve upon.

### 2.5.1 Breaking hits Montreal: the early 1980s

Breaking came to Montreal youth in two main ways, first through TV and film images of the dancing and second through live one-on-one contact. Many black Montrealers had relations south of the border who would be part of the transmission, a verification and readjustment of those images seen on the screen. Ethnic minority Montreal youth frequently looked to American television as local programming was dominated by a Euro-Canadian vision of the Canadian identity. It did not adequately represent their colour or culture. Black dancers on American television shows such as *Soul Train* portrayed a culture that validated their nascent Africanist and youthfully rebellious aesthetics.

Eugene Poku was one such youth. Arriving in Montreal from West Africa in 1966 at the age of six, he was faced with a racism he had never before experienced. He turned on to dancing as a way to channel his frustration and anger. The Pokus didn't have cable television, but some twist of fate or wiring let Eugene tune into *Soul*

*Train*. In 1974, Eugene Poku took to his basement to emulate and perfect the moves and attitude that would allow him to reinvent himself as a funk street dancer. At 14 years old, Poku rounded up his two younger sisters Therese and Patty Poku and formed the locking group the *Shaka Dancers*<sup>36</sup>, later continuing with his brother Johnny as a duo (Eugene Shaka Poku and Johnny Shaka) called the *Shaka Brothers*. Their fame spread city-wide as they performed across the city, for audiences in nightclubs, at cultural events and as back-up dancers for several now famous artists, including a young Celine Dion and the funk act *Boule Noir* (a.k.a. George Thurston). They also appeared on a local public television show called *Feel Like Dancing*, the Quebec equivalent to *Soul Train*<sup>37</sup>. Poku's focus was on locking, but by the late 1970s there also were at least two popping groups in Montreal, *Cosmic Force* and *Vision Force*, both from the Côte-des-Neiges neighbourhood<sup>38</sup>. Poku created a model, appropriating an African American dance form learnt through mass media, for other black youth to follow.

David Dundas, a Montreal b-boy known as DKC, remembers getting an early live glimpse of breaking while in Manhattan on a visit to relatives in 1980. But his descriptions of impossible rocking and flying limbs were not believed by his Canadian peers until the movie *Wild Style* (Ahearn 1982) appeared on the screen of one small cinema in Montreal in 1982. He remembers, "everybody [in the audience] was screaming. For us it was like the first '– oh, that's possible? I can spin on my back<sup>39</sup>?!'" A fever had hit. When *Flashdance* came out in 1983, Dundas stayed in the movie theatre all day, just to catch over and over again those three minutes of breaking sandwiched between the melodrama. Already familiar with funk dance styles from his own avid *Soul Train* viewing, Dundas was impressed enough with this new street dance style to pursue the same rigorous process of self-teaching that Poku

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<sup>36</sup> Poku used the stage names Touch and Baby Blue.

<sup>37</sup> Eugene Poku, interview with author, Montreal, March 27, 2006.

<sup>38</sup> David Dundas, interview with author, Montreal, January 29, 2006.

<sup>39</sup> David Dundas, interview with author, Montreal, January 29, 2006.

and countless others have undergone – going down to the basement and out to the schoolyard to figure it out on their own bodies. These fleeting visual impressions plus the chance encounter with a dancer from California at Studio 1234 on de la Montagne Street – a locker who threw in a backspin on the dance floor and consented to give Dundas and a friend a short lesson – were the basis from which they took to their basements to learn the dance. It was easier to understand the mechanics of moves such as the backspin, than the footwork, which was quick, and rhythmically complex. Scrapes and bruises ensued, but the battle scars are worn proudly. “I used to do it on the concrete. I used to run and go on my back. It used to hurt,” remembers Dundas with masochistic glee<sup>40</sup>.

Montreal b-girl Natasha Jean-Bart recalls a similar process of self-instruction based on media images and through trial and error:

I would watch it on TV, you know like when first I saw Michael Jackson on *Motown 25* and they first did the Moonwalk with Billie Jean? I remember just watching it, freaking out – the next day everyone that had seen it at school, we were all trying to do the Moonwalk. And then there were these two boys that actually got it and we’re just like, ‘oh my god, how are you doing this?’ And then they were teaching us. And basically it was always by memory, we would watch [TV obsessively], because we didn’t really have, we couldn’t really [video]tape anything back then<sup>41</sup>.

Jean-Bart, who became an accomplished locker and breaker, went to see *Breakin’* (Silberg 1984) twice when it came out in order to absorb as much as she could of the dancing. Although she later realized that the dancing was a mishmash of several styles, she was lucky enough to have personal contacts that could clarify the confusion. She recalls:

I just fell in love with the style. We didn’t have that in Montreal, so that whole LA feel, the colours in the movie, the beach, it’s very, very enticing, for me. ... Luckily I had some people in my neighbourhood that would go up to New

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<sup>40</sup> David Dundas, interview with author, Montreal, January 29, 2006.

<sup>41</sup> Natasha Jean-Bart, interview with author, Montreal, May 28, 2004.

York sometimes and come back and go 'oh yeah, I hung out with those dancers.' And they were like, 'they taught me this and they taught me that'<sup>42</sup>.

Dundas asserts that early breakers in Montreal did not concern themselves with stylistic purity, but mixed locking, popping and breaking.

In the *Soul Train* show I saw locking; I saw popping. But still there, to me it was the same thing. Not the same speed, but the same thing. It was street dance; it was Funk. Or I was mixing popping and locking together. Because for me it was new<sup>43</sup>.

It was equally natural for the *Shaka Brothers* to incorporate the floorwork and power moves of breaking into their stand-up locking routines, as it likely was for the popping groups. It took awhile for the categorical precisions to filter northward.

In this early period a park on Mountainside Avenue in the Côte-des-Neiges neighbourhood was one place b-boys went to battle. Another was the Negro Community Centre (NCC), which held frequent dances, and the Pointe-St-Charles YMCA. The École Joseph-François Perreault, a high school specializing in music in the Saint Michel-Nord district held early hip hop events. There were pockets of breakers all around the city, mainly in the low-income neighbourhoods that were home to non-white families. Dundas' first crew was called *Flash Tricks*, later called *New Energy*. He was also part of a group called the *Ghetto Dancers*, a mixture of Montreal and American b-boys created by a DJ from New York who occasionally came to perform. By 1984, Dundas estimates there must have been between 50 and 100 groups or crews in Montreal, with names such as *Something Different*, *Galactic Crew* and *Future Wave*<sup>44</sup>. *Comedies Gang* was a group from the east end that did strictly locking. By 1985 only a handful of white kids had filtered into what was still largely a black and Latino youth culture in Montreal.

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<sup>42</sup> Natasha Jean-Bart, interview with author, Montreal, May 28, 2004.

<sup>43</sup> David Dundas, interview with author, Montreal, January 29, 2006.

<sup>44</sup> David Dundas, interview with author, Montreal, January 29, 2006.

In 1984 video jockey Mike Williams hosted a well-publicized battle at the Spectrum, a large venue on Ste Catherine Street<sup>45</sup>. Poku performed a non-competing demonstration routine and *New Energy* won the battle. *New Energy* was also making pocket change dancing on the streets, in metro stations, and at various venues, for example they would regularly perform at the Rendez-vous Miller in the Olympic Stadium before the Expos' games. When the *New York City Breakers* performed at the Palais des Congrès, in 1984, Eugene Poku was one of the opening acts. By the mid-1980s Dundas bought a Beta machine and began taping his group with a friend's camera. He would ask film crews for a copy of each of their TV performances<sup>46</sup>. In this way they could study their dancing and correct mistakes. In 1985 *New Energy* opened for James Brown at the Paladium, an event that Dundas remembers as one of the highlights of his career (K 2005b, p.33).

For three years in the mid-1980s *Montreal Acrobatic Dancers (MAD)*, located first on Mount-Royal Avenue and then in the St-Henri neighbourhood, became a centre for street dancers to continue to train. Poku considers that this was where the first formal classes in street dance styles were given in Montreal. Diehard lockers, poppers and breakers went to dance, and language was not a barrier<sup>47</sup>.

But as the 1980s wore on, the majority of the city's street dancers stopped practicing and performing, bringing out their moves only on occasion, as party tricks. Dundas' group *New Energy* broke up, and Eugene Poku concentrated on a fusion style he was developing with ballet-trained Jessie Goldberg. A new hip hop dance called New Jack Swing became dominant in music videos and slowly eclipsed the popularity of breaking and funk dances.

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<sup>45</sup> *La Presse* reporter Denis Lavoie estimates that there were a hundred breakers at this event (1984).

<sup>46</sup> David Dundas, interview with author, Montreal, January 29, 2006.

<sup>47</sup> Eugene Poku, interview with author, Montreal, March 27, 2006.

### 2.5.2 The winter of breaking

During breaking's 'winter' period – roughly between 1986 and 1990, the dance in North America went underground, out of the limelight. Goldberg figures that ultimately the fitness and aerobics craze of the 1980s killed the thriving dance scene in Montreal, not only for street dance styles incidentally, but for all kinds of dance. She met Poku at a downtown dance school in 1982:

It was called '5-6-7-8' and it was where Nautilus is right now downtown. There was *Les Ballets Russes* and *Les Ballets Jazz* and across the street was *Pointépiénu* for a while and 5-6-7-8. Montreal was full of dance schools and full of opportunities for dancers. It's hard to tell people who are in it now that there is nothing going on compared to what was it was<sup>48</sup>.

Goldberg and Poku joined forces and formed the dance/martial arts/acrobatic duo called *Special Blend*, active for twenty years, touring schools, theatres and busker festivals.

When *New Energy* broke up in 1986, Dundas figures there were only about two groups left, which would soon enough disappear themselves<sup>49</sup>. Jean-Bart recalls:

Breakdancing died. It got so commercial and then at one point people were spinning on their heads and a couple of them broke their necks, parents were like, 'don't do this, don't do that!' And then it kind of dropped, and at one point there was nothing, there was no more locking, no more breaking, no more popping, there was nothing about it any more and it died for awhile<sup>50</sup>.

While it may have felt like a death to the dancers who lived and breathed breakdancing, it did not disappear entirely. Montreal b-boy Johnny Walker Bien-Aimé (Skywalker in the breaking community), claims that breaking sporadically appeared at special hip hop nights at certain nightclubs. Dundas stopped practicing

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<sup>48</sup> Jessie Goldberg, interview with author, Montreal, March 27, 2006.

<sup>49</sup> The Ottawa crew, *Canadian Floor Masters*, was founded in 1983 with original members including TrickyT (Trevor Walker), Coach (Matt Sparks), Dexter (Chris Albrey), Buddha (Steve Leafloor), KidQuick (Wayne Lacasse), BeatStreet (Rob Giroux). The crew never folded during this period and can therefore rightly claim to be Canada's oldest b-boy crew.

<sup>50</sup> Natasha Jean-Bart, interview with author, Montreal, May 28, 2004.

and performing, but at parties would still occasionally bring out a few moves. Jean-Bart still locked, but states she had to conceal it in her jazz dancing, when she taught and when she performed as a backup dancer for rappers.

The movement generated by breaking, funk dances and its composite, breakdancing, were renewed into new hip hop dances, both above ground, and below. In the underground club scene these movements were incorporated into new dances such as house, voguing and wacking. For example, in house dance<sup>51</sup> breaking elements are smoothed, softened, the movement more condensed to fit in smaller spaces (Sommer 1998, p.636).

Popular hip hop music changed with the introduction of a new hybrid style lasting from around 1987 to 1994 called New Jack Swing, combining rhythm and blues (R&B) and hip hop, soulful singing over street beats. The dancing that adapted to accompany this music included a succession of fad dance styles with steps like the Whop, the Reebok, the Cabbage Patch, and the Roger Rabbit<sup>52</sup>. This dancing is epitomized in MC Hammer videos and the TV sketch comedy show *In Living Color's Fly Girls* led by Rosie Perez (Wayans 1990-1994)<sup>53</sup>. With faster beats and a more jumpy feel, this music did not leave room for the precision and personality of locking, popping and breaking styles. Based on frontality and unison, the dance was better suited to take second place to the music by providing a visual backdrop during concerts and in music videos. Certain artists like Redhead Kingpin and the Canadian rapper Maestro Fresh Wes were known for having good back-up dancers on their music videos. "It was super physical, super sexy dance. It wasn't about girls being pretty on the side; it was in your face, sweaty and rocking out," remembers Montreal b-girl and contemporary dancer Claudia Fancello<sup>54</sup>.

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<sup>51</sup> For an excellent article on house dancing, see Sommer (2001/02, Winter)

<sup>52</sup> Scholar Hazzard-Donald (1996) calls this a third stage of hip hop, naming it 'rap dancing'.

<sup>53</sup> Perez also danced New Jack Swing during the introduction to Spike Lee's film on urban racial tension *Do the Right Thing* (Lee, 1989).

<sup>54</sup> Claudia Fancello, interview with author, Montreal, November 23, 2004.

However, according to Jean-Bart, even New Jack Swing lost its popularity by the mid-1990s as hip hop music became even slower and more difficult to dance to. She states:

It [became] a mid-tempo kind of rap. I was teaching aerobics at this point and I was trying to pitch the music all the time because it was too slow. We used to play all the old school [music], to get the class going, but it was getting boring<sup>55</sup>.

However, around the same time and in a small way, breaking was slowly making its reappearance in North America – and Montreal in particular.

### 2.5 3 The resurgence: *Tactical* and *Flow Rock* crews

In 1991 rumours that breaking was flourishing on the other side of the Atlantic already began spreading in Montreal. Jean-Bart remembers that an unnamed DJ friend of hers came back from a trip to Belgium that year raving about seeing a breaker spinning on his head for several minutes. In 1994 he brought back proof in the form of a videotape of the German b-boy Storm, executing breaking moves on a level that surpassed what they had done and seen in the 1980s. It is claimed that the dance never died out in Europe. According to Montreal filmmaker Josh Miller (2004) Storm led his crew *Battle Squad*, appearing in commercials and touring Europe throughout the late 1980s. In 1990 they travelled to the U.S. in search of ‘Old School’ breakers, in order to hone their skills and honour the originators of the dance. Their enthusiasm gave new energy to the *Rock Steady* crew and other breakers. B-boying started appearing in music videos, as American rappers such as *KRS-One* and the hip hop group *Lords of the Underground* overcame a collective amnesia concerning the dance and its inseparability from the music.

Crews in Montreal began forming again. A b-boy named Dazl<sup>56</sup> formed *Down Rock Complex (DRC)* with DJ Essence in 1992 (K 2005b). Their first performance

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<sup>55</sup> Natasha Jean-Bart, interview with author, Montreal, May 28, 2004.

<sup>56</sup> Full name Irvin St-Louis.



was opening for American rapper Craig Mack at the Metropolis. In 1994 the crew name changed to *Flow Rock*, and new members including Dundas (as DKC)<sup>57</sup>, Freezer, Zig and Dr. Step<sup>58</sup> joined. In 1998, when her three kids had all begun elementary school and she had more spare time, Jean-Bart joined as b-girl Tash (Greenaway 2001).

Bien-Aimé, at age 15 in 1994, saw the crew *Dope Squad* perform in the Théâtre Patro le Prévost on Christophe-Colomb Avenue as part of a hip hop show, and was swayed to quit basketball and become a breaker (Laabidi 2005b, p.22). His first crew, *Sub Connection* practiced in his parents' basement. He states, "We didn't have no spot for practicing, except our basement. My parents were really going crazy when I brought all my friends to come and practice<sup>59</sup>." When the group discovered that the Rock Gym on Ste-Catherine Street had opened its doors to breakers in order to practice, they moved.

There they met other b-boys and crews. Other crews active at the time were *CIA*, *Illegal Combinations*, *Montreal Breakers* and *Crazy Crew* (Ben Saâdoune 1998). In 1995 someone by the name of Goldylocks began organizing events and breaking competitions in Montreal (Silverman 1998). For a time in 1997, Walken of the *Montreal Breakers* opened a school in the Belgo Building on Ste Catherine Street (Ben Saâdoune 1998). The scene was building itself up again.

Although mainstream society may have seen breaking and hip hop culture in general as an anti-social movement with delinquent tendencies, in fact breaking was

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<sup>57</sup> According to the documentary *What is a b-boy?* Dundas was encouraged to begin breaking again in the 1990s by someone named David Cooley who remembered seeing him dance in *New Energy* (Miller 2003).

<sup>58</sup> Freezer, Zig and Dr. Step are Gilbert Baptiste, Éric Martel and Clauter Alexandre.

<sup>59</sup> Johnny Walker Bien-Aimé, interview with author, Montreal, March 7, 2006.

at least initially an alternative for youth in low-income areas to the vice of petty street crime. B-boys were regarded in their own communities as a positive force. Bien-Aimé states:

It's a dance from the ghetto, you know, and in the ghetto there's all kinds of people. So if we guys from the ghetto are shinning, all our people were coming out to support us. Because we were, like the movie said – '*The Freshest Kids*'. The positive vibe from the ghetto<sup>60</sup>.

It seems to have provided an important safety net: when *Dope Squad* dropped off the map during a general lull in the scene in the mid-nineties, according to Bien-Aimé there were rumours that they had gotten into dealing drugs and other gangster activity, while members of *Tactical* and *Flow Rock* crews seem to have avoided these dangerous vices.

In 1996 *Sub Connection* merged with two other crews, the *Golden Breakers*, composed of Asians and Latinos from Laval, and a Haitian crew called the *Scalphunters*, to form a mega-crew, with the goal of securing performance gigs. Bien-Aimé (as Skywalker), Jayko and Sand Man from *Sub Connection*, Sissana, Chollo and Lepauchan from the *Golden Breakers*, and Warlord Shockwave, Shinobi, Grand Master and Prince Dopestep<sup>61</sup> from *Scalphunters* performed together as *Tactical* crew<sup>62</sup>. They put together an act, opening for touring American hip hop artists such as *Wyclef* (date unknown), the *Fugees* (with *Cypress Hill* and *A Tribe Called Quest* at the Molson Centre October 1997), and *Outkast* (October 1997), filming publicity for Rogers AT&T, and participating in music videos for local rap artists such as *Dubmatique* (Laabidi 2005b). Their manager was Jayko's older brother

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<sup>60</sup> Johnny Walker Bien-Aimé, interview with author, Montreal, March 7, 2006.

<sup>61</sup> Only a few of these individuals have been identified with full names. Jayko is Jacques Wood Eloï, Warlord Shockwave (later Omegatron) is Jonas Napoléon, Grand Master is Pierre-Richard (last name unknown), and Sand Man is Romuald (last name unknown). The full names of Sissana, Chollo, Lepauchan, Shinobi and Prince Dopestep have not been located.

<sup>62</sup> Johnny Walker Bien-Aimé, interview with author, Montreal, March 7, 2006 and Scott C (1999).

Rudy Eloï, who found them contracts through his contacts as an actor. *Flow Rock* also performed in music venues alongside touring rap artists such as *KRS-One* (Spectrum, May 1997), *Naughty by Nature* and *NAS* (dates unknown), as well as special events such as the Salon Pepsi Jeunesse, Célébration 2000 (Laabidi 2005a).

The conditions when performing at these events were generally quite poor. The breakers were rarely paid and the surfaces they danced on were sometimes unsafe. Too often compensation came in the form of free beer and 'fame'. Bien-Aimé cynically asserts, "Yeah, they call it fame, but I'm asking what kind of fame, you know? That fame won't pay my rent<sup>63</sup>."

Through the mid-nineties the Montreal street dance scene was small and not too friendly. According to Bien-Aimé, many b-boys operated outside of the crew structure, finding the competition between the two main crews too heated. B-boy Dingo (Joe Danny Aurélien), a member of the *Tactical* spin-off crew *RedMask* remembers:

It seems like back then, when you had a group you had to stick with your group only. When you went to practice or dance with another group it was disrespectful, you can't do that. Back then. And there were more groups. Small groups, but everyone was fighting against each other. It was more exciting (quoted in Miller 2004).

*Tactical* and *Flow Rock* dominated the Montreal breaking scene. Other crews mentioned as having existed in the early 1990s seem to have fallen off the radar, while younger crews had not yet formed or proven themselves. The two survivors were rival crews, one known for its power, the other for its finesse of style. This was Montreal's second generation of breakers.

In the nineties there were only a few organized jams where b-boys could battle. A jam or circle cypher is a competitive forum where dancers vie for recognition

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<sup>63</sup> Since around 2001, Bien-Aimé asks for a minimum fee for a *Tactical* performance. Unfortunately, younger crews are able to undercut them, as no professional standards have been agreed upon. Johnny Walker Bien-Aimé, interview with author, Montreal, March 7, 2006.

through the execution of solo, improvised movement phrases. The sequence of individuals is negotiated through a body language spoken in the danced entry and exit from the circle centre. Because their numbers were so few, by the end of the night b-boys often went head to head or ‘battled’ someone from the same crew. The winner of each round was determined by crowd consensus. These events created a focal point around which the ‘community’ could come together. Sally Sommer asserts the important role that underground sites such as nightclubs serve in the life of what she terms popular dance:

Clubs have been the institution of learning for popular dance. There have always been groups of committed social dancers who go to clubs to work on their craft, rather than drink, take drugs, or pick up partners. They keep standards high and set models for new dancers (1998, p.635).

For three years running (between 1997 and 2000) a breaker by the name of Goldylocks organized a competition named *Rock On* at the Taj Mahal skateboard centre on Berri (now site of Montreal’s Grande Bibliothèque) (Silverman 1998). The Cox (now Sky) bar on Ste-Catherine Street in the Gay Village would also have occasional jams. On Sunday nights *Tactical* dominated the Voltaire bar on Prince-Arthur Street with a graffiti crew and Shades of Culture, a local rap group. “A few members of *Flow Rock* used to come, but they would get battled, for sure. Cause that was our night, that was our club, we used to own it,” recalls Bien-Aimé<sup>64</sup>.

Needing more of a challenge, some Montreal street dancers made pilgrimages to other North American cities to gatherings such as the *Rock Steady Anniversary* in New York and *B-boy Summit* in LA. These international b-boy competitions provided the backdrop for crews to test their skills. It also provided opportunities for ‘Original Generation’ breakers to give classes and speak about the roots of the dance. West coast funk dances of locking and popping were also highlighted. Dancing with the

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<sup>64</sup> Johnny Walker Bien-Aimé, interview with author, Montreal, March 7, 2006.

pioneers of the form helped Montreal breakers improve their ‘foundations’ of the dances.

#### 2.5.4 More established: breaking today

In the late 1990s new crews began to form, helping to diffuse the *Flow Rock/Tactical* hostility that had previously dominated the scene. *RedMask* formed in 1998, with Oktofoot, Dingo, Klish, Thundablast, Rockit and Bambino<sup>65</sup>; students and family members of the *Tactical* crew (K 2005b, p.36). *Area 51*, *Illmatic Styles* and the b-girl crew *E5* also formed around that time. In the early 2000s the crews *DFS*, *Legz*, *701 Squad*, and *Endless Sky* formed. Meanwhile, *Tactical* and *Flow Rock* have become in recent years increasingly less active as crews, their members often acting in other capacities, producing, MCing, judging battles, many times collaborating on the same events, and teaching. To this day many b-boys and b-girls also continue to operate outside of crew structure. There is also a growing number of street dancers who specialize exclusively in locking, popping and the ‘new school’ styles of house and freestyle hip hop<sup>66</sup>, although breaking still dominates the underground scene, as it has since the early 1990s.

The scene is also not quite as dominated as it once was by men. Alsterlund recalls how at the *Rock On* battle in 1998 only two women attempted to battle, herself and another woman, a member of the *Upside Down* crew from Ottawa. The organizers made them battle each other, although the other woman did mostly popping and Alsterlund did capoeira-inspired movement. When she won, Alsterlund took the microphone and made an impassioned speech for more women to become b-girls. At the Strictly Breaks battle in 1998 Alsterlund remembers that the main battle

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<sup>65</sup> Dingo is Joe Danny Aurélien. The full names of Oktofoot, Klish, Thundablast and Bambino are unknown.

<sup>66</sup> House is an upright club dance that focuses on footwork. Hip hop is also an upright dance that is a fusion of locking, popping, b-boying and dancehall.

was (as it often was then) between *Tactical* and *Flow Rock*, and the atmosphere was so vicious that she questioned if she really wanted to be a part of the culture<sup>67</sup>.

Although prior to this time women were far from absent from the breaking scene, *Ellementale-5* (E5), formed in 1998, was the first crew in the city made up exclusively of women. The five members were K8 Lynx Alsterlund, Claudia Short Circuit Fancello, Suzie Myrage Iliyan, Dana Twinkle Toes Schnitzer, and Michelle Snakey Simone Simon<sup>68</sup>, university students and nightclub dancing enthusiasts without any breaking skills at the outset. They focused their attention on performance, and learned their chops as they went along. Fancello recalls:

I look at it now and I think ‘what freaks we were for even trying!’ We had no clue what we were doing, in terms of breaking – and we didn’t even have a right to use that term, you know, but we did<sup>69</sup>.

The group trained regularly at the Victoria Gym on de Maisonneuve Street with b-boy Radar (Ben Yankson) from Alberta, and then at contemporary dance choreographer Martha Carter’s loft in open classes under the guidance of b-boy Shockwave (later Omegatron) of *Tactical* crew. Omegatron called the group his *99ers*<sup>70</sup>. E5 was often criticized by the more veteran b-boys for their lack of technique while getting more than their fair share of opportunities to perform. If nothing else, it seems as if the challenge pushed them to become better dancers, as states Schnitzer:

There was some sense in the community that us girls were getting a lot of shine, props, attention, media coverage because we were girls, and that we actually didn’t have the skills to back up the attention that we were getting... So we (tried to be) physically so good that no man can say ‘they’re famous because they’re girls. They are artists who rock and are talented and they are girls’<sup>71</sup>.

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<sup>67</sup> K8 Alsterlund, informal conversation with the author, Montreal, October 19, 2006.

<sup>68</sup> Later some of these women changed their b-girl names so that Short Circuit became Viva Mancina, Myrage became Silk-Soul and Twinkle Toes became Radio.

<sup>69</sup> Claudia Fancello, interview with author, Montreal, November 23, 2004.

<sup>70</sup> K8 Alsterlund, interview with author, Montreal, March 18, 2006.

<sup>71</sup> Dana Schnitzer, interview with author, November 13, 2004.

In summer 2000, four members of the *E5* crew, members of another all-girl crew *Dysfunkshn* (*DFS*) (formed in winter 2000) and a few other women, joined to create a b-girl group made up of fourteen women. Around the same time *E5* dissolved. This larger group set up group practices at the Victoria Gym on de Maisonneuve in order to exchange skills and performed freestyle shows as did *E5* before them under the name of *Solid State*, while *DFS* continued to 'represent' at battles in Ottawa, Kingston and Toronto for some time. Ultimately the visibility of *E5*, *DFS* and *Solid State* provided an opening for more women to participate in the underground culture of breaking.

The 'above ground' image of dance in hip hop culture is of course dominated by what Jean-Bart calls 'video style' hip hop, often taught in watered down form in schools and studios across the city. It takes some work to sort the superficial instructors from the more studied, and while one might be tempted to lump all hip hop dance classes in one group as cardio eye-candy, in fact the dance requires skill and practiced when done well. Classes in breaking are also publicly available.

Several commercial hip hop dance studios, notably Urban Element at Jean-Talon, Shauna Roberts Studio downtown, 8 Count in the West Island and Studio Sweatshop in the Plateau have emerged over the past few years, offering classes in a wide range of street dance styles, including breaking. Higher profile teachers, such as Popmaster Jorge Fable Pabon (member of the original *Rock Steady* crew, March 2004) and Yvon Crazy Smooth Soglo (member of Ottawa's *Canadian Floor Masters*), are often brought in from out of town to teach intensive workshops and judge events. Organized 'battles' also provide opportunities for breakers to freestyle (improvise) in the more informal circle cyphers before and after the official judged competition.

Perhaps this organized activity and integration with more 'above ground' locations such as dance studios as well as the increased involvement of women and middle-class youth has thinned breaking's underground and aggressive identity somewhat. However breaking is still seen as a valuable alternative to the vices of poverty for economically disadvantaged youth. In 2006 David Dundas (aka DKC)

was teaching at the Côte-des-Neiges Community Centre, Johnny Walker Bien-Aimé (Skywalker) was teaching at Graffiti-Café in the Hochelaga-Maisonneuve neighbourhood, and Parc Extension Youth Organization (PEYO) was also offering classes in breaking. Many of these organizations offer their classes to youth free of charge due to their low-income environments. Hip hop's four elements or artistic disciplines: graffiti, DJ-ing, rapping and breaking are seen as powerful tools to appeal to and inspire youth.

### **2.5.5 Across borders: the artistic frame**

Street dance in a fusion with contemporary dance is not a new phenomenon in Montreal. As mentioned earlier, the duo *Special Blend* with Eugene Poku and Jessie Goldberg have been creating a hybrid dance form merging street dance, ballet and modern, acrobatics and yoga since the early 1980s. Although they initially applied for and received Arts Council grants, their work seems to have flourished as a busking act and their company could survive without direct support from the Councils. In the early 1990s a performance group using the nightclub dance style called Vogue formed, calling itself *House of Pride*. *House of Pride* was drag queens in motion, competing (and winning every year from 1993 to 1995) Montreal's *World Ball For Unity* (Silcott 1997). Among their members was one woman, Martha Carter, by night a drag queen, by day a modern dancer, one of the founders of the experimental dance space Studio 303 and a modern dance teacher.

By 1998, Carter was leading *House of Pride* into more conventional stages while still keeping a presence in the nightclubs. Their first full-evening show called *House Opera* presented at the Saidye Bronfman Theatre in the Snowdon neighbourhood in January of 1998 was badly received by critics. After that the group was in flux and conflict, but Carter continued to pursue the idea of presenting nightclub dancing on the proscenium stage. When *House of Pride* as a competitive voguing group officially dissolved, Carter reformed the company under the name *Marta Marta* (later *Marta*



*hOp*), hiring dancers with both contemporary and club dancing experience<sup>72</sup>. In 2001 dancer/acrobat Kelly Jean Starship dance artist Joe Hiscott created the *Out of the Shadows* event at Tangente, a contemporary dance theatre. They invited the *Solid State* (their first participation in a recognized dance venue) and Carter to include pieces. The same year *Käfig*, a hip hop contemporary dance company from France performed at Usine C in November 2001 and in April 2002, American Rennie Harris's *Puremovement*, a more traditional hip hop performance group is presented by La Série Danse Danse at the Centre Pierre-Péladeau, both to sold-out audiences.

In 2002, two other Montreal contemporary dance companies were created that incorporated street dancing: the American import Victor Quijada's *Rubberbandance Group (RBDG)* and the French popper Ismaël Mouaraki's *Destins croisés*, both employing some of Montreal's most skilled breakers. These two companies, plus *Solid State*, by this point a group of eight women focused on artistic dance creation and collectively choreographing, participated in the first *Définition non applicable* (DNA) event in 2003. This event, organized in part by *Solid State* and *Kops* crew, united the contemporary dance venues Montréal, Arts Interculturel (MAI), Tangente and Usine C in presenting street dance-influenced contemporary dance. This event was revived in 2004 but has not been recreated since.

*RBDG* is probably the most successful of the hybrid companies, going on to benefit from a residency at Usine C in 2004 and performing at the Canada Dance Festival in Ottawa in 2006, while *Solid State* (now a much smaller team) is also very active while performing at smaller contemporary dance venues, notably Tangente (2001, 2003, 2004, 2006)<sup>73</sup>. The membership of *Destins croisés* has also changed a great deal, and while they have benefited from a prestigious residency in France, they

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<sup>72</sup> These include K8 Alsterlund of *E5*, JoDee Allen of *DFS*, Claudia Fancello (who had worked for Carter in *House of Pride* as a back-up dancer since 1998) of *E5* and *Solid State*, and Kelly Jean Starship. Later Helen Simard of *DFS* and *Solid State*, Pamela Schneider and Emmanuelle Lê Phan both of *Solid State* were hired.

<sup>73</sup> A review of their piece *Take it Back*, which premiered at Tangente in 2006 can be found in Appendix L.

have had few performance opportunities in Montreal. Other independent choreographers in Montreal use street dance vocabulary in their choreographies, notably K8 Alsterlund and Alexandra L'Heureux.

## **2.6 Chapter conclusion**

Breaking in its vernacular context is evidently lush with activity and vibrancy in Montreal, an aspect that will be further explored in the following section. When I began this research it seemed as if the contemporary dance mutations of breaking were posing a threat to the underground breaking scene. While this threat no longer seems to me to be direct, there are still issues in the transference left to tease out. While not a huge preoccupation among street dancers, there are some grumblings on this translocation, which will be explored in more depth in chapter five.

## CHAPTER 3

### BREAKING IN VERNACULAR CONTEXTS

#### 3.1 Introduction

The following sections are based on Joann Kealiinohomoku's analysis of the dance event in her *Theory and methods for an anthropological study of dance* (1976). It begins with 'who': the dance-makers, the dancing participants, the non-dancing participants. In this section I have included issues of transmission of the dance, as discussed in section 1.5.3. Kealiinohomoku emphasizes the importance of the analysis of 'who' because:

It concerns roles and memberships: who makes the dance, who does the dance, who helps the dance become reality, who views the dance and, conversely, who does not, cannot, or will not fill any of these roles (1976, p.238).

'Who' is followed by 'what', an analysis of the dance itself. This section begins with breaking's aesthetic ideology in vernacular contexts as discussed in section 1.5.1, and follows with aesthetics of style, a discussion of form and reproducibility (as per section 1.5.2) and structure.

The 'where' of breaking in a vernacular context cross-sections the physical locations in order to access the nature of the activity in relation to its various locations. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the time dimension ('when') of

vernacular breaking and the motivations of the breaker in the vernacular context ('why').

## 3.2 Who

### 3.2.1 Dance-makers

Social or popular dances are generally perceived to have only vague and unidentifiable origins. "With few exceptions, social dances, like folk melodies, are unattributable. They arise from among the more robust, less constrained layers of society to find general acceptance," states Don McDonagh (1989, p.627). This type of statement may suggest that there was no human agency involved in the creation of dance forms, that they arise mysteriously and inexplicably. Kealiinohomoku emphasizes on the contrary that:

It is fallacious to believe that a dance can be conceived without specific human guidance, although some students of so-called folk dance or primitive dance seem to believe that dances appear in a kind of spontaneous generation. ... In societies that lack institutionalization of Dance, the role of dance maker may be intermittent and often anonymous. In contrast, where Dance has been institutionalized and the Dance maker role is ongoing, the Dance maker may be given high status (1976, p.272-273).

Clearly, as the previous chapter has demonstrated, breaking does have a series of key individuals who were agents in the creation of the form. This recognition of breaking's founders is a relatively recent preoccupation among generally only older breakers, but one that is ongoing. Since breaking's resurgence in the mid-nineties it has become important to committed breakers that their peers around the world not only honor the originators of the dance, but also the foundational technique or what are called the 'foundations' of the dance. This insistence is in part to combat the popular notion that breaking is a formless, foundation-less, purely improvisational dance where you can pretty much do what you want from having seen it on TV. Far from it, as Montreal breaker K8 Alsterlund (b-girl Lynx) puts it:

There are what we call foundations of the dance, and there are originators of certain styles, certain b-boys who are doing a certain style and you can say

that that move or that style of moving within breaking started with that person. You can say, 'oh yeah, that guy got his style from *Remind* or those animal-style movements on the ground came from *Baroush*. And so you can track where certain movements in breaking came from'<sup>74</sup>.

However it takes a committed breaker to be conscious of these various originating dance innovators, and it takes a talented and almost obsessive breaker to spark new dance styles and forms. Since street dance in general encourages innovation and personal inflection of movement, these new styles have been plentiful. According to dance folklorist Anca Giurchescu, individual innovation of an earlier dance form over time becomes normalized into its own stable and separate form (1983, p.24). Alsterlund argues that the one Montreal breaker that has pioneered his own distinct dance style is Lazylegs, who has developed movement on and off his crutches which is specific to him.

Being an improvised dance, however, means that each performing dancer is a dance-maker, responsible for the sequencing of his or her own movement in any given moment of dancing. The dance-maker therefore is not one individual per dance event, given official artistic credit for the movement, but a large group of people who unequally participate in the making of portions of the dance. Breakers are notoriously individualistic, and collaboration within crews is often limited to battle strategy. In freestyle performances on stage a structure of sequential solos is often used to bypass the need for direction giving or direction-taking. In situations where one member of a group might have taken more leadership in the composition of a more complex sequence, if credit is given at all, it is given to the group.

### 3.2.2 Dancing participants

It is difficult to estimate how many breakers there are in Montreal. This is partly due to the question of definition. What makes a b-boy or b-girl? Are the limits defined by skill level, level of participation ('rep'ing at community events),

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<sup>74</sup> K8 Alsterlund, interview with author, Montreal, March 18, 2006.

adherence to the foundations, ability to freestyle (improvise) or have one's own particular style (not 'biting' or stealing someone else's style)? K8 Alsterlund (b-girl Lynx) guesses the number to be over 100, or 500 if you include students. But the answer to these questions would vary depending on who you ask<sup>75</sup>.

Montreal breaker David Dundas (DKC) distinguishes between what he considers to be 'real' b-boys and what he calls 'show-time' b-boys. Real b-boys are those that are motivated to dance by a desire to battle, while show-time b-boys participate in the dance either to make money or have a good time, riding the wave of breaking as it were a fad<sup>76</sup>.

Alsterlund's definition is somewhat different. To call oneself a breaker the fact must be recognized by one's peers. Dancers can only prove their status through the public enactment of the dance. Both Kealiinohomoku and Giurchescu also assert the importance of witnesses in the identity-formation of the dancer. Kealiinohomoku states:

Performers and performances depend upon responders to complete the experience. [Dancers] thrive on the responses which come from their peers, as well as from their viewers and all the rest of the non-dancing participants (1976, p.238).

The following statement by Giurchescu reinforces this:

Dancing is a socialized cultural activity and, it very seldom appears as a private and isolated act. The togetherness of people (including both the performers and the spectators) is one of the aims of dancing in almost all cultures (1983, p.22).

B-boy Johnny Walker Bien-Aimé (aka Skywalker), however, challenges this notion by asserting that there are many dancers he considers to be b-boys in Montreal who do not dance in public:

J - There's a thousand b-boys in Montreal, they never go out. Never go out. They walk on subway with the hood on their head, you know? They don't want to get seen.

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<sup>75</sup> K8 Alsterlund, interview with author, Montreal, March 18, 2006.

<sup>76</sup> David Dundas, interview with author, Montreal, January 29, 2006.

L – so what makes them a b-boy?

J – Cause they still practicing on their basement. It's not because you are showing up on the front of people that's going to declare you who's a b-boy. A lot of people get a mistake of that. [They think that] because they do a show they [are] b-boys. [Because] they do foundation – ah, they real b-boy! Nah, cause a lot of people they don't want to do that for other people. They just do it for theyself, in their basement. And they still b-boys – for me, when I watch them; damn, they b-boys<sup>77</sup>.

Although the basement breakers do not attend public dance events, they do allow people, namely Bien-Aimé, to watch them on occasion. Bien-Aimé's presence allows for a social interaction, however intimate. This social interaction is presumably of importance to the dancer, certainly it allows for a peer to judge the quality of their dancing and in doing so to reinforce their identity as a breaker. Bien-Aimé's statement, rather than contradicting Alsterlund's idea of a need for the public demonstration of dance skills, probably reflects more the desire of some b-boys to dance not for the gratification of public admiration that organized battles and freestyle performances can offer, but for the genuine, simple love of the dance. This is closer to Dundas' distinction between 'real' and 'showtime' b-boys.

I would like to suggest that a working definition of a breaker in Montreal is someone who freestyles using the foundations of breaking in the presence of one or more informed spectators who can validate the experience. Therefore breakers become breakers when they are recognized as such by qualified members of the breaking community. It is at this moment in their personal training when the rehearsal is put into practice – when that which one has practiced as an exercise is finally and fully danced. This moment is often in a public cypher or battle, where mistakes, if they occur, must be converted into some kind of punctuation that saves face – no apologies allowed.

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<sup>77</sup> Johnny Walker Bien-Aimé, interview with author, Montreal, March 7, 2006.

### 3.2.2.1 Crews

Bien-Aimé's observations also raise the question of group affiliation. Breakers often associate in 'crews'. Crews are loosely based on a gang structure – you battle to represent your crew, to give it a good name. Crews practice together in order to combine resources (both financial and dance skills), for a sense of group cohesion and to develop routines in order to battle or perform. Crews can have from five to ten members on average, some many more. There are at least seven major active crews in Montreal in 2006<sup>78</sup>.

As addressed in the previous chapter, many breakers in the city are not part of a crew. These breakers operate as free agents, dancing in circle cyphers (a space for freestyling in front of peers), competing in one-on-one competitions, or making temporary associations for battles involving more people.

### 3.2.2.2 Clothing

Breaker clothing style is generally functional and stylish, with obvious links to current and 1980s hip hop fashion. Clothing ideally allows for freedom of movement, while still giving a good view of the body and its movement. In the 1980s crews would typically wear matching t-shirts with iron-on lettering to distinguish their crew affiliation in battles. These days the only crew that wears identical shirts is *Legz*<sup>79</sup>, and even then only at some battles and not others. In two-on-two battles some dancers will occasionally coordinate their outfits. B-boys generally wear loose t-shirts and baggy jeans, although not so baggy that it impedes movement. B-girls often either dress like the guys, or wear the more form-flattering tight shirts and low-riding, loose pants. Footwear is generally stylish sneakers with a smooth tread.

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<sup>78</sup> *RedMask, Area 51, Illmatic Styles, Legz, 701 Squad, and Endless Sky*. This would make over 50 breakers in crews in Montreal.

<sup>79</sup> Dundas formed *Legz* of his best students. He in particular is conscious of reflecting an 'old school' aesthetic and approach.



### 3.2.2.3 Ethnicity

While breaking was predominantly black and Latino in its early days, it has always been, and is increasingly, a racially-mixed activity. Bien-Aimé insists that youth of all nationalities were breaking in the early 1990s. “There was Chinese, Thailand people, Korean, all kind of Latin people, all kind of black people<sup>80</sup>.” When *Tactical* crew formed there was only one white b-boy called Leprechaun, while Zig (Éric Martel) was the one Caucasian in *Flow Rock*. While the proportion of white and Asian breakers has increased, the inner core and more senior breakers are still predominantly black<sup>81</sup>.

### 3.2.2.4 Gender

It goes without saying that street dance is a male-dominated domain. The dance is very cardiovascular and daring and requires substantial upper body strength. The fiercely competitive nature of the dance made for very aggressive dancers. In the 1990s especially, crews often operated as a bit of a boys’ club. The number of b-girls in Montreal has increased steadily over the years, probably in large part due to the visibility of the all-female groups *Ellementale-5* and *Solid State*. Natasha Jean-Bart (b-girl Tash), Alexandra Spicey Landé and Shauna Roberts are two other very visible female street dancers in Montreal who teach hip hop techniques<sup>82</sup>. Most b-girls do not join crews, preferring to operate as free agents.

### 3.2.2.5 Transmission

At first in Montreal, breakers learnt breaking exclusively in their basements, in the schoolyard or on street corners through the process of trial and error and from

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<sup>80</sup> Johnny Walker Bien-Aimé, interview with author, March 7, 2006.

<sup>81</sup> I find it curious that breaking has been not only perceived as distinctively ‘black’ but appropriated and dominated by black people in its diaspora since its 1980s media boon when the protagonists of the dance were in fact largely Latino.

<sup>82</sup> Since February 2006 Jean-Bart has been working for Cirque du Soleil in Las Vegas.

peers. They were working out physically what people had seen on TV or in movies such as *Flashdance* (Lyne 1983), *Beat Street* (Lathan 1984) or *Breakin'* (Silberg 1984, Firstenberg 1984). When VCR's became widespread, it became common to use videotaped footage in order to study breaking moves in depth, with liberal use of the rewind and pause buttons<sup>83</sup>. This type of transmission of the dance is very much in line with assertions by Hoerburger (Nahachewsky 2001), Kealiinohomoku (1972), Shay (1999), Pietrobruno (2002), Friedland (1995), and Malone (1996) assertions on the transmission of vernacular dance discussed in the first chapter.

However, most breakers learning the dance form today do so in studio classes. And yet, breaking classes are far from being institutionalized in Montreal. While many classes involve a monetary exchange, therefore creating an exclusionary or class (affordability) question, several classes are offered in community centres free of charge. Additionally, it is widely acknowledged that classes only provide a very basic instruction, and that it is only through dedicated practice and public dancing that the dance is fully assumed. Input and verification from the lived experience of the dance in jams (circle cyphers), battles or crew practice as well as from various media sources such as videotapes, DVDs and the Internet continue to be an essential self-directed part of the training process. Breakers must be obsessive in their quest to achieve the feats of gravity-denial essential to the form.

### 3.2.3 Non-dancing participants

Nahachewsky's ideal of the 'participatory' dance has all members of a community actually engaged in the dancing activity (1995). Breaking, in contrast, is a dance that requires witnesses that are not-dancing, at least for the period during which

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<sup>83</sup> In 1984 several instructional videos were released on breakdancing, but the dancers I interviewed did not admit to using these. I suspect there may be an extensive underground traffic in low-budget home movies that served to instruct a whole generation of breakers. For example, the video of the German b-boy Storm that Jean-Bart saw in 1992 surely served as a model that the re-emergent breakers followed.

the participant in question is dancing. Like other 'traditional' dances, such as the gypsy roots of Flamenco and a large portion of dances from Africa, breaking is typically danced in the round, with a crowd demarcating the performance area and only one dancer inside that area at a time. Depending on the nature of the event, this crowd will be made up of dancers on 'pause', waiting their turn to dance again, and of what I will call 'sideliners'.

These 'sideliners' are, to varying degrees, informed insiders or uninformed novices. The informed sideliners are individuals who are able to judge the quality of the dancing and will express that opinion vocally and with their body language. They may have some dancing abilities, but are not at that moment exhibiting themselves in a cypher, battle or freestyle performance situation. They create an appropriate environment during circle cyphers or battles by hooting, whistling, cheering favourite dancers and impressive moves. The further underground the event, the more the crowd will be made up of dancers on 'pause' and the more informed the sideliners will be.

For example, the monthly *Call-Out* events (explained more fully in the section 3.4) are advertised mainly within the community and therefore do not draw many non-informed spectators. The March 2006 *Call-Out* was attended primarily by active breakers, ready to participate. Similarly, the *Canadian B-Boy Prelims* in April 2006 was attended by very few non-breakers. The February 2006 *Bonnie and Clyde* battle, in contrast, was very publicly and widely advertised, as it formed part of the *Festival en Lumière's* 'Nuit Blanche' activities. A shuttle bus brought all-night revellers to various locations throughout the city for a sampling of the night's activities. In this context, attending a 'breakdance' battle was made accessible and appealing to individuals that might otherwise be intimidated by breaking's exclusive and underground aura. Consequently, at this event, many non-informed spectators were present, looking much like tourists at an exotic foreign cultural performance. However the inner circle was still largely made up of insiders, savvy enough to get there early or assertive enough to make their way to the inside ring of spectators. The

February 2006 *Call-Out* was also attended by many non-breakers, probably because one of the competing crews invited family and friends outside of the breaking community. Events that involve other hip hop dance forms may also attract a very mixed audience, as did the April 2006 event called *Bust a Move!*, which had battles in locking, popping, b-boying, house and freestyle hip hop.

Other non-dancing roles that are involved in the Montreal breaking scene include the event organizer, the DJ, and specifically for organized battles, the MC and the judges. The DJ is key to creating the proper environment and essential ingredient for dancing – the music. The most popular DJ for battles in Montreal is DJ Static, who is relied upon to provide a collection of appropriate tunes, considered classics for b-boying and other street dance forms, with clear musical distinctions between the forms. If the event is simply a special club night for breakers, the organizer remains behind the scenes. In organized battles, the organizer often doubles as a judge or MC. The MC hosts the event, interacting verbally with the audience. At a battle this person calls the contestants to dance, announces and enforces the rules and when needed banters with the audience to pass time. Judges are invariably senior breakers who are well known and respected in the community or perhaps are visiting from another city. At *Bust a Move!* the breaking judge was ‘Crazy Smooth’ from Ottawa’s *Canadian Floor Master’s* crew, and the following day he was to give a special workshop at the studio Urban Element, as were the other judges at that event, each specialists in a different street dance form. The MC was the dynamic ‘Dr. Step’ (Clauter Alexandre) of *Flow Rock* crew while the organizer, Alexandra ‘Spicey’ Landé remained largely invisible. At the *Bonnie and Clyde* battle, the three judges were Zig (Éric Martel) from *Flow Rock* crew, Omegatron (Jonas Napoléon) and Bien-Aimé (who doubled as the MC) from *Tactical* crew.

### 3.3 What

Breaking is, at its essence, a dance. It is not simply a series of flashy air moves, the hallmark windmills and air flares for which it is known. Rather it gathers together

a vast array of moves, including highly developed footwork patterns, which form its base. Its moves are named, although the numbers and variations on them have never been completely recorded. It is a dance which is intimately tied to its music.

### **3.3.1 Aesthetics of vernacular breaking**

#### **3.3.1.1 Aesthetics of ideology**

It goes without saying that the vernacular breaking event does not create dance pieces or 'oeuvres' of art. Particularly inspired movement phrases of freestyling will be celebrated in the moment, but the memory of them will live in the minds of those witnessing it, never to be repeated in exactly the same way. Increasingly breaking in its vernacular context is videotaped, but the purpose of this recording is not to make it into an object, but to use it as a tool, taking from it lessons in both good and bad executions of the dance. The aesthetic ideology of vernacular breaking is therefore that of a social dance, where the meaning of the dance is imbedded in the greater event and the relationships and interaction involved. The activity of dancing is processual, part of an entire life-style, rather than product-oriented.

#### **3.3.1.2 Aesthetics of style**

At the core of the breaker's *raison d'être* is a pursuit of the perfection of style. Breakers distinguish themselves from mainstream hip hop. In a general sense breaking style can be described as 'old school', or at least it must in some way refer to the early days of breaking culture. This is expressed as an attention to the OG. But innovation and personal style are also paramount. In terms of body attitude, I would describe the breaking style as rebellious or anti-authoritarian, epitomized in the b-boy stance of widely planted feet, arms folded tightly across the chest, head cocked to one side. It is a style laden with bravado and machismo. It may be defensive, protective, or threatening, but it also barely conceals a youthful zest and physical energy.

Some of these qualities of style can be related to Brenda Dixon-Gottschild's five qualities of Africanist aesthetics in African American dance forms:

polycentrism/polyrhythm, aesthetic of the cool, embracing the conflict, high-affect juxtaposition and ephebism. Ephebism is in my estimation the strongest of these qualities most often present in breaking, which invariably relies on power, daring, humour, and surprise to create its mesmerising effect. As Thomas F. DeFrantz describes it, “body power draws from the illusion of physical weightiness, of neediness, of the voracious consumption of space... For dancers, weightiness and aggressive physicality – unchecked virtuosity – lead us into the beat” (2004, p.74). Breaking is a dance that juts forward quickly, where moves are launched into, and where the body is thrown into seemingly impossible gravity. It is a constant play with one’s centre of gravity. An essential recoil, a brief gathering of strength before the attack, precedes each explosive movement.

But this vital motion is enacted with an attitude of ease and détente, which brings the ‘Aesthetic of the cool’ into play. The movement is not the controlled and constrained exactness of ballet, rather, it is executed with loose limbs, so that the energy doesn’t balk at the end of a movement phrase, but is kept in a continuous flow. The quality of ‘Embracing the conflict’ is expressed in the contrast between the two previous qualities and between the still torso and the intricate fast-moving footwork of the downrock. The very similar quality of ‘high-affect juxtaposition’ is best expressed in the contrast between the athletic way a dancer transitions between levels, or hangs upside down in an angular hand-stand for a few moments, just enough time for the viewers to, so to speak, reassemble the body in their minds in order to comprehend the vision<sup>84</sup>. These stylistic approaches to movement are shaped by the manner in which a dance is assembled, that is to say its form.

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<sup>84</sup> The difference between Embracing the conflict and High-effect juxtaposition is that the former involves simultaneous opposites whereas the latter implies quick physical transitions or movement between them.

### 3.3.2 The improvisational form

Breaking in its vernacular form is an improvised dance. The improvisation of breaking is in the paradox of the communal aesthetic and individual expression. Spontaneous scripting of movement inflected by personal style is mediated by an adherence to form. In street dance language, the term used is 'freestyle.'

In breaking, as in other street dance forms such as hoofing (vernacular tap dance), locking and popping, personal style or flavour is highly valued. The dance is nothing if it doesn't have a personal flair to it. For Alsterlund:

[Breaking] is an improvised dance, it's so open to interpretation, and people innovating and making up new ways of moving. And there a core of movements, like in any dance, like in ballet. This is 'six-step', and this is 'top rock', and this is an 'entry', but within each of those things there is so much variation. I think a lot of people don't realize that subtlety, and the potential to use the music to play off of the movement. That's really important with some of the best dancers and in the best breakers, not only are they doing things that are physically extremely difficult, they are doing those things on the music<sup>85</sup>.

In vernacular dance the rules of the form are more developed than those in post-modern improvised dance forms. Dancers invariably follow the conventions of the form they have been trained in. In order for the dance to be considered breaking, the movements must remain within the framework of the dance form and follow the structure of the dance. Jackson paraphrases Dixon-Gottschild when he states that an improviser, "requires a thorough knowledge of these traditions and their interrelationship so that when one structures the dancing, one always begins and ends 'with the defining steps of the dance'" (Jackson 2001, p.42). Malone concurs, stating that:

Creativity must be balanced between the artist's conception of what is good and the audience's idea of what is good. The point is to add to the tradition and extend it without straying too far from it. The circle in black social dance is a forum for improvising and 'getting down' but the good dancer does not go outside the mode established by the supporting group... When a dancer enters

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<sup>85</sup> K8 Alsterlund, interview with author, Montreal, March 18, 2006.

the magic circle it is a way of renewing the group's most hallowed values (1996, p.234).

The dancers draw from their banked vocabulary in order to build their movement sequence in the moment of performance. Alsterlund uses the phrase 'arsenal of moves'<sup>86</sup>, a telling way of describing the process of improvisation: all dancers have sets of moves that they feel comfortable using in performance. These moves are variously combined and recombined. Choice of these moves is always strategic, always based on an instantaneous evaluation based on several considerations – how the body is feeling, what to save until later, what comes easily, what needs more preparation, etc. Giurchescu likens this process to a game, stating:

In a certain way improvisation closely resembles a game: the same sort of spontaneity, the same sort of satisfaction, and the same pleasure in finding a personal solution in a given situation, by manipulating pre-existent rules. By 'playing' with and against the dance's structural features and those of the music, with and against the co-dancers and the audience, each dancer tries not only to be 'himself' when improvising, but intentionally tries to get out of the group to show off (1983, p.26).

Breaking is a particular form of dance within a family of dances, the street dance family. In the early 1980s in Montreal a lot of locking and especially popping could be seen in breaking freestyle situations, but as the years have gone by aficionados have become educated about the distinctions between the forms and mixing tends to be frowned upon. Dancers may sometimes be reminded to stay within the limits of the form in the context of an official battle.

The irony of skilful freestyling or improvisation is that one has to have a mastery of the technique in order to appear to forget the technique. In performance there is no time for deliberation, decisions happen on a mind-body level. Each movement performed serves as an opening into a wide possibility of new performable movements, and each movement must be so well integrated into the bodily repertoire that it flows into the next movement with a seamless ease.

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<sup>86</sup> K8 Alsterlund, interview with author, Montreal, March 18, 2006.



### 3.3.3 Structure

In breaking, the sequence of these movements is far from random, but it is loosely structured. The entry into the dancing area is invariably with the uprock. After that anything could happen. The standard format is the uprock, floor rock, power move and then freeze. Sally Banes describes her version of this sequence from her observations conducted in the early 1980s in her article on breaking in the *Encyclopedia of Dance*:

The original format of the dance was quite fixed. Each person's turn begins with an entry, a hesitating walk that allows him time to get in step with the music and take his place 'onstage'. Next the dancer 'gets down' to the floor to do the footwork, a rapid, slashing, circular scan of the floor by sneakered feet, while the hands support the body's weight and the head and torso revolve at a slower speed. Acrobatic transitions such as headspins and flips serve as bridges between the footwork and the freeze, an improvised pose or movement that is a flash of pure personal style, as intricate, witty, insulting, or obscene as possible. The sequence closes with an exit – either a spring back to vertical or a special movement that returns the dancer to the outside of the space. Solo turns can be extended indefinitely by inserting more footwork, spins and freezes (1989, p.538).

Notice how, despite the wealth of detail in to this descriptive, Banes barely touches on the uprock. It is a part that is sometimes ignored by 'power movers' intent on moving quickly into the impressive acrobatic moves. 'Power movers' often begin their solos making a vague gesture towards the uprock by strutting the edge of the circle, as if building momentum before going into a head spin or some other dazzling move. In contrast, other dancers may assert the more rhythmic aspects of the dance. Not only is the uprocking an essential element of the dance, but it is also an element that, when done well, should be integrated into the other elements. Too often, it can come across as another dance entirely, with no relationship to the dancing that happens closer to the floor. Uprocking and footwork are the areas where dancers express or play off the rhythmic qualities of the music. It is the fluid linkage of these

various segments that makes a truly talented dancer. Alsterlund describes each of the parts of the sequence as vertical levels in space, asserting that:

A really good breaker will make you forget about the difference between levels. They're changing levels multiple times. And that's what's so exciting and great is that they are making you forget that they are doing this huge transition in level, in space, up and down<sup>87</sup>.

For the purposes of this study, I have categorized the movement vocabulary of breaking into four main areas: uprock<sup>88</sup>, downrock (or footwork), freezes and power. The uprock is executed primarily from an upright position; footwork is done with the upright torso hovering just above the ground, freezes are moments of stillness, often executed with the body inverted and power moves include most spin moves. Each of these areas or levels is associated with a wide series of moves, each with specific names<sup>89</sup>. A fourth area on the periphery of the foundational movement of breaking, 'tricks', could include everything that is a departure from the foundations.

A lot of the uprocking steps are in part derived from the 1970s dance called Rocking and in part from earlier social dances, in particular Latin steps such as the Chacha, Merengue, or Salsa. The execution of these movements in breaking is heavier and looser than in the original versions, danced with slightly hunched shoulders, bent arms, the hands cupped as if ready to throw a punch or grab onto something. Variations on the standard uprock steps (Indian step, Charlie Chase, Brooklyn Rock, etc.) are endless and often personalized.

The downrock requires quick footwork, strong arm and leg muscles, all the while keeping a relative stillness in the upper body. The torso generally stays at the level of a squat, while the legs slip, twist, and kick beneath it in a circular pattern, building

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<sup>87</sup> K8 Alsterlund, interview with author, Montreal, March 18, 2006.

<sup>88</sup> Sometimes also called top rock. Although some sources claim that top rock and uprock are different, the contacts I have made in the breaking scene have not made a consistent distinction between the two terms.

<sup>89</sup> Attempting to name and define each of the moves in breaking is a daunting task completely beyond the scope of this study. Suffice it to say they are plentiful and I have merely touched the tip of that iceberg in this section.

momentum from its centripetal force. It is reminiscent of Cossack squat kicks, but early breakers not only mastered the art of hovering close to the ground, they stylized the trick to suit the syncopated rhythms of their music and their own standards of style. Becoming agile with these moves requires that they be performed with fluidity and musicality. Steps can be combined and recombined endlessly for so long as the dancer has the physical strength.

Where breaking clearly outshines other street dances is in its freezes and power moves. Freezes are moments where time almost stands still – the dancer strikes a precarious balance and holds it as long as momentum will allow. It involves balancing the body weight on one or more body part, like the hand, the forearm, the foot, the head or a combination of points. Freezes act as an exclamation on the end of a sentence. Power moves such as swipes, windmills and flares involve the body rotating around itself with great momentum. The legs, arms or hips must usually be whipped in order to generate this momentum while the body's core must be well centred. These are not rhythmic moves, although performed with skill they can punctuate the beat. They are one-off events. They are heroic feats of force and skill. They depend on counterbalance for the freezes and centrifugal force for the spins; often they require both.

Tricks are, according to Bien-Aimé, entirely personal, original creations. These include moves between two or more dancers, sometimes elaborated into a short routine with dancers using each other as support and pivot points for creative freezes. For example one dancer will hold the other dancer's foot in the air while they do moves, or pretzel-like contortions where they dive through the spaces in each other's limbs. Tricks can also include crew 'blow ups', which are elaborate group freezes, often pyramids which end in some kind of punch, such as a flip. Again, tricks are resisted by traditionalists, who do not consider them as compatible with the foundations of breaking. However they are becoming so common (and arguably also existed back in the 1980s), that many traditionalists also accept them as part of breaking.

### 3.3.4 Dialogic relationships

A breaker is responding to his or her environment as he or she dances. The environment is not only architectural, it is human and dynamic: fellow dancers, spectators and the DJ. The breaker needs to be ‘listening’ to audio and visual clues in order to be able to respond appropriately, in order to be able to engage in the danced conversation.

In any public breaking situation there are spectators. In the cypher the solo dancer relates to a surrounding crowd of people. Dixon-Gottschild states that the use of “call-and-response implies that every part of the community is important to [the] continuity and richness [of the dance], that everyone has a voice and, through it, the power to act, enact, react” (1996, p.144). For the most part these are informed spectators that will be able to respond to particularly challenging moves with supportive encouragement: cheers, clapping, hoots, whistles. Alsterlund states:

When you go into the freestyle circle it’s about you and how you affect the circle, the people around you, how you get the crowd amp-ed, how you get the people watching amp-ed, how they respond<sup>90</sup>.

This parallels Gore’s observation on African dances that the performer-audience relations are “dialogic and dynamic... A successful performance is therefore judged by the excitement generated in the audience, and their responsiveness” (2001, p.34).

This audience is essential for dancers to get a sense of their achievement. It is an energy that stimulates them to take risks, to finish movement phrases rather than letting them trail off or end abruptly, to find appropriate solutions to the movement challenges created. This relationship is a give and take, a cyclical energetic interaction.

In a battle situation there is an additional level of interaction, that between opposing dancers or groups of dancers. “In the battle, the combat plays out in a

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<sup>90</sup> K8 Alsterlund, interview with author, Montreal, March 18, 2006.

tension between the circle of confrontation and the audience that cheers, encourages and judges<sup>91</sup>” (FTBA Moïse 2004, p.23). A battle in breaking is the equivalent of a ‘challenge dance’ in hoofing or tap dance (see Stearns 1968 and Hill 2003) and a parallel to the African American verbal art of street rhyme called ‘toasting’ or ‘signifying’ (Hazzard-Donald 1996, p.226). It is a furious competition to see who is the best dancer.

Motivated by a dare, focused by the strict attention to one’s opponent, and developed through the stealing, trading, and riffing of steps, ‘tap challenge’ is my term for any competition, context, breakdown, or showdown in which dancers compete before an audience of spectators or judges (Hill 2003, p.90).

The dialogue in this instance takes on the form of an argument – dancers (or groups of dancers) take turns making movement statements which display not only their technical skill, but also their ability to make the other breakers (or crews) look bad. Alsterlund describes how this dialogue or ‘call and response’ is negotiated on the dance floor during a battle:

When you are battling, you’re really trying to think spatially, how are you going to organize your moves. Because you want to organize your moves towards the other team. Your disses, your blow ups, everything that you want to do towards the other – your burns. You’re thinking of ways to burn the other team, how to trick them, how to make fun of them, you’re really thinking about your opponent, what your opponent does really affects your reaction. If your opponent does this move then you are going to do that move in response. If your opponent does power you have to respond with power from your crew or from your arsenal of moves. It’s very strategic, and very focused on the other person or the other group of people, what they are going to do, how you are going to respond. It’s call and response<sup>92</sup>.

This relates to the Stearns’ description of ‘signifying’ as “an aggressive style of joking in which you put down, berate, sound, diss, or pull rank on someone by referring to an aspect of his or her behavior” (1968, p.93).

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<sup>91</sup> “Dans le *battle*, le combat se joue dans une tension entre le cercle de l’affrontement et le public qui acclame, encourage et juge.”

<sup>92</sup> K8 Alsterlund, interview with author, March 18, 2006.

In breaking there is also a dialogic relationship to the music. Identification with the beat of the music is paramount to the dancing of a breaker. Malone asserts that a propulsive and steady rhythm is characteristic of African American vernacular dance (1996, p.231). DeFrantz states that in hip hop dance ‘the dancer creates dialogue by making the beat visible and shaping its accents into coherent phraseology’ (2004, p.73). Many street dancers say that the ‘b’ in ‘b-boy’ is for the ‘beat’. The feet and the hips are the centres from which most rhythmic movement emanates. This is the polycentrism/polyrhythm described by Dixon-Gottschild (1996).

The DJ acts as a live musician, ‘mixing’ records. His or her choice of records and timing of mixing is done in response to the environment of people present<sup>93</sup>. Opportunities abound where the dancer not only follows the music, but may also play off the music, imposing counter-rhythms and accentuating strong moments with a physical response. The freeze and ‘blow-ups’ are moments when the dancer can accentuate a moment in the music. A good DJ of course always has a selection of music particularly suited to the dance style in question. A good breaker will know the repertory of standard b-boy tracks inside out, able to anticipate the phrasing of the music. This is called ‘hitting the strikes’ according to Alsterlund. “If you know the song, you try to emphasize high points in the music – it’s very mathematical<sup>94</sup>.” A poor dancer can easily lose contact with the beat and rely on the non-rhythmic power moves for effect. The DJ may at times put on a particular song for a particular dancer, knowing that it is a favourite.

### 3.3.5 Composition in breaking

Although it may be possible to say that breaking is in its essence an

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<sup>93</sup> A few b-boy ‘anthems’ include ‘The Mexican’ by Babe Ruth; ‘Get On the Good Foot’ and ‘Pass the Peas’ by James Brown; ‘Apache’ by Sugarhill Gang, as well as recent remixes of some of these earlier funk tunes (K8 Alsterlund, informal conversation with author, October 19, 2006).

<sup>94</sup> K8 Alsterlund, informal conversation with author, October 19, 2006.

improvisational form, there are circumstances in which pre-set composition is used. Increasingly over the past several years, pre-planned 'routines' are being used, particularly in crew battles. Alsterlund's 'arsenal of moves' (mentioned in the previous section) also implies an 'arsenal of choreographies' or short combinations of movement centred around a particular theme. In the past crew battles might have had a succession of solos where each individual is primarily responsible for him or her self. Increasingly group battles involve 'strategy battling', which means that dancers are preparing in advance intricate interacting or unison movement. Alsterlund estimates that crews need to have a minimum of four or five routines in order to be competitive. She uses the example of *Flexible Flav*, a crew from the US that has around 50 choreographies in their repertory. Another crew with a lot of choreographies is *Vagabonds* from France<sup>95</sup>.

Various standard compositional techniques can be used to create these routines. Group unison is an obvious device that can be made more complex through the manipulation of floor formations. Partner work of tricks is another example. Several dancers can work together to create group freezes, perhaps with cheerleader-style human pyramids, often involving counterbalance. Or they can use contrasts so that while the rest of the group is doing one thing, one dancer breaks out into a solo section using a surprising acrobatic move. In more complex routines scenarios will be enacted revolving around a theme.

Alsterlund describes such a composition in a piece by the *Fireworks* crew from Japan:

Four guys were kneeling down and they formed a bed, basically they formed a platform and the other guy was lying down on them, like it was his bed. And then there was this other guy on the other side of the stage headspinning, and he was [mimicking] the soundtrack, he was the alarm clock, waking the other guy out of bed. And then, the guy gets up and he goes over and he turns off the alarm clock, and the guy stops headspinning. He goes back to bed, the alarm clock starts going again, he starts headspinning, he gets up and he kicks

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<sup>95</sup> K8 Alsterlund, interview with author, Montreal, March 18, 2006.

the alarm clock and the guy, the headspinner jumps away, and then they go to the next part of the choreography<sup>96</sup>.

This use of planned compositions might be said to test the limits of the vernacular definition or 'original social context' of breaking, where there is now the use of reproducible 'pieces' rather than the borderless continued spontaneous sequencing of movement. These 'pieces', while used only intermittently and in conjunction with improvisation, still represent a tendency towards fixedness, a quality typically associated with dance in a second existence and dance in performing arts contexts.

### **3.4 Where**

Breaking in vernacular contexts occurs in several different physical locations. It takes place in the home, in outdoor public spaces, at the community centre, the dance studio and in the nightclub. It even, as argued by Jackson (2001) and Shay (1999) (see section 1.4.3.2), exists on presentational stages. In order to describe these physical locations, I have divided this section into subsections based on the context under which the dance is being executed.

#### **3.4.1 Skills development**

As all dancers, breakers are eternal students; their learning never ends. Every time breakers dance or watch others dancing, they are re-evaluating and refining their movement possibilities. Informal instruction is continuous. This informal instruction can happen in the home, at jams specifically organized for practices, and on the dance floor.

In our northern climate of Montreal, this type of practice will just as often occur indoors as on the stereotypical 'streets' of street dance. Before breaking instruction became more formalized in studio classes or even in group practices in private

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<sup>96</sup> K8 Alsterlund, interview with author, Montreal, March 18, 2006.



studios, breakers used what spaces they could, and very often this would be the basement of the family home. After seeing the *Lockers* on TV's *Soul Train* (Cornelius 1971- ) in the early 1970s, "I went downstairs, into the basement, and just started practicing," says Eugene Poku<sup>97</sup>. Bien-Aimé also used the basement for his crew practice in the mid-1990s. B-boy Freezer (Gilbert Baptiste) remembers pulling his mattress onto the floor in order to practice flips on it<sup>98</sup>. Even today, Alsterlund keeps a sparse livingroom floor, a 10x10 foot square perfect for practicing in. Many breakers find spaces they can clear to work out moves in the privacy of their own homes.

'Open practice sessions' are regularly offered in various locations, often for a minimal fee. In the 1990s practice sessions were generally a closed affair, crews protected their skills and discouraged outsiders from joining in. In this decade they are more open. Alsterlund organizes a weekly practice session at the Mange Mes Pieds studio on Pine Ave, which she characterizes as being very open and 'un-political.' According to Alsterlund, Freezer (Gilbert) practices in public almost daily. He reserves the busker spots in metro stations, turns on his ghetto blaster, and works on his moves. He is joined regularly by Alsterlund and others who practice with him<sup>99</sup>.

As mentioned previously in section 2.5.4, several community centres in low-income or immigrant neighbourhoods offer classes to local youth, often free of charge. The Côte-des-Neiges Community Centre offers free classes by DKC (David Dundas) and Dazl (Irvin St-Louis). Parc Extension Youth Organization (PEYO) is a centre that offers courses in rapping and breaking. Café Graffiti, located in the Hochelaga/Maisonneuve district offers free classes in hip hop arts, including breaking classes twice a week given by Bien-Aimé. This is where I took several breaking classes. The centre, located in a ground-floor storefront space on Ste Catherine Street

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<sup>97</sup> Eugene Poku, interview with author, Montreal, March 27, 2006.

<sup>98</sup> Gilbert Baptiste, informal conversation with author, Montreal, April, 2006.

<sup>99</sup> K8 Alsterlund, interview with author, Montreal, March 18, 2006.

east of Pie-IX Blvd is essentially a drop-in centre for youth in the lower east end. The décor is bare-bones: the space has one mirror on a wall in front of a minimal 12x12 foot sprung wooden dance floor built upon concrete. A cafeteria-style table and chairs occupy the other half of the space, with a few computer terminals for the visitor to use. The walls are covered in graffiti canvases, presumably made during the graffiti art workshops. Students have to take turns using the floor to practice their steps due to the limited space.

There are also several commercial dance studios which specialize in hip hop dance offering breaking classes. These classes are usually held alongside classes in (video style) hip hop, locking, popping, house and sometimes 'Stomp' or Dancehall. Urban Element at Jean Talon, Shauna Robert's studio in the Belgo Building and 8-Count in the West Island are three of the more visible schools. Occasionally more traditional dance studios will offer breaking classes, although that is more rare. For example, Alsterlund offered breaking classes at Studio 303 in the Belgo Building between 2000 and 2005. Studio Sweatshop, directed by JoDee Allen and Helen Simard (currently the Artistic Directors of *Solid State*) is a bit of a hybrid studio, offering classes in breaking, house, ballet and jazz, as well as private sessions in Pilates.

### 3.4.2 Circle cypher

Circle cypher is the basic form of breaking in the public realm. This is the classic situation where a crowd forms a circle creating a dance space in the middle that spans about 16'x20'. Audiences are usually more than two people deep. The circle is a very strong tradition in both African and African American dance forms. Claudine Moïse describes the importance and symbolism of the circle in the following citation:

The circle is central, it expresses the essence of this dance right from the start. In the street, a dancer dives in and the crowd forms around him, like today in the freestyle cyphers after a show. The circle protects from the street and dictates ways of transcending its tensions and aggressions. It also speaks of a dance between the dancers, not intended to be seen on stage, as a

performance. The circle is the battle zone in an ancestral ritualization, circumscribing symbolic battles, battles in which the audience is completely involved, traditional ceremonial dances, Roman combat, modern fights like boxing or bullfighting<sup>100</sup> (FTBA, 2004, p.23).

Individual breakers take turns, an average of 30 seconds to three minutes long, 'freestyle' dancing or improvising in the circle. The sequence of individuals is negotiated through body language. The dance will usually end in a freeze or a pause, like a final exclamation mark on the sentence just stated. A new dancer will begin to move, either in a walk-strut around the edge of the circle or in the side-to-side movement of the uprock, sometimes travelling laterally in space, until assured of the crowd's attention, and that no other dancer is going to attempt an entry at the same time. Occasionally two enthusiastic dancers do head into the circle at the same time. In these cases it is up to one or the other to cede the circle to the other and wait for the next turn.

In her early fieldwork in the lower Manhattan nightclub, the Roxy, Kate Morgan vividly describes the geography of the cypher:

Balance is very important. Inside the breakdance circle, equilibrium is relentlessly being challenged. The audience participates by securing the importance of that circle. The closer they press in the smaller the circle becomes; the smaller the circle, the more control is needed to whip and flop, spin and snap. A breaker has to be more skillful, tighter, more focused as the circle closes in. It's inevitable that the circle folds because the audience 'aspires' to be at its edge. People push. At the edge it is dangerous. The momentum that a dancer can build up from his spinning and whipping around is so full of force that should a foot or head or arm hit you, it would probably break a bone. ... It's interesting; we press in to watch, facing danger. The

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<sup>100</sup> "Le cercle est central, il exprime cette danse depuis le début. Dans la rue, un danseur se lance et l'attroupement fait cercle, comme aujourd'hui dans les free styles après les spectacles. Dans une métaphore, le cercle est protégé de la rue mais là on dit aussi quand il faut en dépasser les tensions et les agressions. Le cercle dit aussi une danse entre soi, qui ne se donne pas en représentation pour une scène, pour du spectacle. Il est l'espace du combat dans une ritualisation ancestrale, celui qui circonscrit les combats symboliques, combats dans lesquels le public prend toute sa part, danses traditionnelles cérémonielles, combats romains, luttes modernes telles la boxe ou la corrida."

dancer orbits daringly close to the outside edge. There are constant adjustments being made, but always the integrity of the circle is maintained (1985, p.17).

The cypher will occur on the dance floor in a nightclub or other place where people are dancing. In the mid 1990s on Sunday nights Voltaire, located 'in the armpit of Angels' on Prince-Arthur just off St. Laurent, was the *Tactical* crew nightclub (C. 1999). It was a location that was shared with a graffiti crew and with the hip hop group *Shades of Culture* providing the music. Bien-Aimé remembers: "that was our night, that was our club, we used to own it. We used to cypher all night long<sup>101</sup>."

Today certain nights at certain nightclubs are known to have the appropriate music and atmosphere for breaking. The *Rockdeep* event Tuesday nights at club Sapphir on St. Laurent Blvd provided a home for breakers for a time. The Saturday night *Do The Right Thing* night at the Blue Dog bar is a good bet, and *The Goods* (DJs Andy Williams and Scott C.) play very danceable funk tunes at the Sala Rossa venue further north on St. Laurent Blvd once a month.

The cypher will also form before and after an organized battle. Before the battle it operates as a warm-up for the dancers. After the battle the cypher will be a celebratory social activity. Dancers who are not participating in the official battle will then get their chance to dance.

The circle cypher is generally a solo dance form: crew affiliation is loose. Dancers are displaying their moves both for a public, and for their own practice. The dancer's attention is often focused inwards, and only occasionally is it directed toward the spectators. Bien-Aimé says, "On cypher, you just let it loose, you go when you are ready, you stop when you want. And it's more emotional too<sup>102</sup>."

This 'emotional' aspect of the cypher refers to the fact that when personalities clash, the circle cypher has the possibility of teetering into battle-mode. Old grudges

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<sup>101</sup> Johnny Walker Bien-Aimé, interview with author, Montreal, March 7, 2006.

<sup>102</sup> Johnny Walker Bien-Aimé, interview with author, Montreal, March 7, 2006.

will be acted out through the dancing and moves may take on an increasingly antagonistic character. The attention of the dancer will be directed, aggressively, towards the adversary. The purpose will be to outdo the other's moves rather than to dance for the sheer pleasure of it. These are 'unstructured battles', where there are no official rules or judges<sup>103</sup>. Alsterlund states:

So that's the thing about a cypher, you could go in, just to showcase your moves and do your thing, not thinking about battling, but then someone will take that opportunity – because you've put yourself in the circle, you've also opened yourself to other people battling you. So sometimes the open cypher will turn into a battle. And an un-organized battle, so there are no rules, right? So anything goes. I think those battles are usually the realest, that's what's most exciting battles to see because they are spontaneous and you don't know what's going to happen<sup>104</sup>.

This situation occurred during the cyphering preceding the *Bonnie and Clyde* battle (Usine C, February 25, 2006), between Freezer (Gilbert Baptiste) and a *Legz* crew dancer who was unknown to me. Each took several turns one after the other dancing aggressively toward the other. Each turn ended with some kind of dismissive punctuation, as if a defiant challenge to outdo the performance.

Because the circle cypher today is considered an open space, these days these movement feuds will be relatively brief. Bien-Aimé states, "We are going to let them go maybe 2-3-4 rounds. But after that we are going to cut it, because everyone is there for dancing, everyone wants to have their time in the cypher<sup>105</sup>." This is what occurred in the Freezer/*Legz* b-boy cypher battle described, after a few rounds other dancers cut in, seemingly ignoring the tension and in fact serving to diffuse it. A group dynamic ended the battle rather than any one person. However, rather than

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<sup>103</sup> In the 1980s the cypher was, in fact, the only place to battle. Dundas recalls that in 1984 a park on Mountainside Avenue was the place where crews would gather for this purpose. Poku remembers the NCC in NDG hosting dances every Friday where battles would take place. In the 1990s, when Bien-Aimé went to Voltaire, friendly circles might mutate into aggressive battles if a member of another crew showed up.

<sup>104</sup> K8 Alsterlund, interview with author, Montreal, March 18, 2006.

<sup>105</sup> Johnny Walker Bien-Aimé, interview with author, Montreal, March 7, 2006.

engaging in direct danced confrontation within the space of the cypher, organized battles are these days the more appropriate place to battle.

### 3.4.3 Official competition

An organized competition means that there is a set structure to the battle. The first remembered organized battle in Montreal was in 1984, organized by VJ host Mike Williams at the Medley (Lavoie 1984). In the 1990s the planned battles were called 'jams' and took place in bars or larger venues. Today, organized competitions are more structured than they were in the 1990s. The question of who participates, in what order, and for how long is pre-determined and monitored. There are several formats that can structure an organized battle. The formats are one-on-one, two-on-two, three-on-three, Bonnie & Clyde and crew battles. Prospective contestants must contact the organizer of the event by a set time (be it hours, days or weeks before the event in order to sign-up as participants. The battle lasts for a set amount of time or is organized by the number of rounds each group takes. Most battles charge a fee at the door to audience members and pay a cash prize to the winners. The cost is generally under fifteen dollars, with a surcharge for those with video cameras. *UnderPressure*, being an outdoor event, is free to the public.

Judges most often work in groups of three, in order to avoid tiebreakers. The monthly *Call-Out* battles, organized by Bien-Aimé for 3 Times Dope Productions, are an exception to this rule in that there are no judges. This battle used to take place at the punk bar Les Foufounes Électriques on Ste. Catherine Street, but in 2004 it moved to the Urban Element dance studio, where there was no smoking and better lighting<sup>106</sup>. At the *Call-Outs*, individuals judge for themselves who has won and who has not. Sometimes the crowd is unequivocal in their support for one competitor,

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<sup>106</sup> These were presumably the reasons the organizers moved the event, however one wonders if it's removal from the edgier atmosphere of a bar might have been less appealing to some.

other times the outcome is less obvious. Victory is often clear between competitors in an implicit knowledge of who got the better of whom.

The structure established by the German event *Battle of the Year* has each team perform a short routine, after which the judge(s) choose four teams to compete in the semi-finals. Two battles will take place, each winner going on to battle in the final, the winner of which wins the title. *Battle of the Year* preliminaries would use the same format (July 2004, Medley, hosted by the Just for Laughs Festival). Holding preliminaries is one way of ensuring that the calibre of the dancing increases as the competition becomes more prestigious. The sums of money available to the winner of these competitions also increase proportionately to its prestige. *Bust a Move!* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition April 2006, Kola Note) borrowed this format, but with two-on-two teams rather than entire crews.

At the March 2006 *Call-Out Bien-Aimé* introduced a new structure, called *Seven to Smoke* in Europe and *King of the Hill* in the United States. In this format each of seven competitors take their turn battling the other six in one-on-one battles. Each battle won is a point, and the one who gets the most points wins.

The yearly *War is War* battle (6<sup>th</sup> edition in October 2006, Medley) is considered the most “important battle of the year for the Quebec b-boy community” according to an article in the hip hop magazine *Unistar* (K & Laabidi 2005). The *Bonnie & Clyde* edition of *War is War* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition February 2006, Usine C lobby) puts male-female teams of two in competition with each other. Both are also organized by Bien-Aimé’s 3 Times Dope Productions. Dundas organizes an all-ages b-boy battle in NDG every August called *Gravity Rock* (9<sup>th</sup> edition 2006, NDG Community Centre). Other breaking battles pop up occasionally, such as the *Canadian B-Boy Prelims* (April 2006, Kola Note).

Some breaking battles occur as part of a larger event, either alongside dance battles of other forms: popping, locking, house, and hip hop dance, or as part of ‘four element’ events which highlight graffiti, music and other aspects of hip hop culture. *UnderPressure* taking place every August in the parking lot behind Fougounes

Électriques is one such event<sup>107</sup>. The *Bust a Move!* event mentioned above and the *Eye of the Tiger* competition (May 2006, Shauna Robert Dance Studio) are two examples of hip hop battle events that include breaking as one form among many. Generally when more forms are present, the calibre of the breaking is lower.

Some battles (*UnderPressure* and *Call-Outs*, for example) take place in the round, with spectators surrounding and on the same level as the dancers. Others, generally those in a bar, use a stage to create greater visibility for the audience. The spectators view the dancing from only one side. At the *Bust a Move!* competition, the judge sat at the back of the stage, so that the dancers had to make choices whether to direct their movement towards their opponent, towards the audience, or towards the judge. When battles happen in the round, the dancers seem to be more focused on the opponent, knowing that the judges and spectators are witness to all angles.

The *Call-Outs* were created by Bien-Aimé in 2003 because he saw that the level of dancing among Montreal breakers was low compared to those he encountered on his travels in Europe. He felt the primary reason was that dancers weren't battling enough. "If you don't battle you won't go nowhere. It's not by practicing in our basement that we are going to get better," he states<sup>108</sup>. Battles create a chance for breakers to set goals for themselves and achieve them. As Bien-Aimé puts it:

It's like a test, like in school, it's the same for us. All month you were practicing for specifically that move. The guys told me and I wasn't good for it. So in the front of him, I'm going to do my best to put it clearly, and perfectly. So did you work enough at home to come to *Call-Out*<sup>109</sup>?

Bien-Aimé also created the *Call-Outs* in order to offer a place for dancers to battle without things getting 'emotional' or too heated. He seems to believe that personal aggressions stall the evolution of the dance while breakers wait sometimes years to settle old scores. "Because I think you can be, hardcore, being rugged,

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<sup>107</sup> Between 2003 and 2006 the battles were organized by Helen Simard and JoDee Allen.

<sup>108</sup> Johnny Walker Bien-Aimé, interview with author, Montreal, March 7, 2006.

<sup>109</sup> Johnny Walker Bien-Aimé, interview with author, Montreal, March 7, 2006.



without being pissed after at someone. But being rugged for yourself. *Juste pour te faire avancer toi-même*. Your own body<sup>110</sup>.” However, David Dundas would disagree, stating that the beef or score to settle is at the heart of the battle. He states:

You gotta have a reason to battle. When you battle another group it’s because they talk behind your back, or they think they’re better than you, or they think their style is better than you, or they just hate you, or they just don’t like you, or you are too popular. Whatever, there are a lot of reasons to battle; it’s a reason to battle. You can’t just battle somebody that you like. I don’t battle people I like<sup>111</sup>.

At the February 2006 *Call-Out* Dundas (DKC) wished to settle a score he had against WD-Forty (Forty Nguyen), a student of K8 Alsterlund (b-girl Lynx). He felt WD-40 laughed too often when breakers made obvious and embarrassing mistakes. He felt he should teach the younger breaker a lesson, so he ‘called him out’ to battle<sup>112</sup>. Unfortunately for him, WD-40 had practiced his moves and had no qualms about bringing in new school techniques such as tricks and blow-ups. DKC stayed with the foundations and his style, being much more old school, seemed conservative in comparison. The crowd decided the winner. Perhaps favouring the underdog, but also appreciating the sheer force of WD-40’s acrobatic disses and humorous blow-ups, the winner was unequivocally decided to be WD-40.

### 3.4.4 Freestyle and showcase performances

Preparing danced movement for an audience is not a recent phenomenon in the world of breaking. As described in chapter two on breaking’s historical context, by the time breaking burst out of Manhattan it was already being modified to suit the needs of a frontal audience. While also being adopted as a vernacularly lived dance on the streets and dance floors of Montreal, breakers here understood breaking as intrinsically adaptable to the concert stage. Home-grown funk dance troupes such as

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<sup>110</sup> Johnny Walker Bien-Aimé, interview with author, Montreal, March 7, 2006.

<sup>111</sup> David Dundas, interview with author, Montreal, January 29, 2006.

<sup>112</sup> David Dundas, interview with author, Montreal, January 29, 2006.

the *Shaka Brothers* and *Cosmic Force*, mimicking the presentational style depicted on *Soul Train*, were already performing on Montreal stages, and so it was only natural for breakers to follow suit.

In 1984 *New York City Breakers* headlined in a stage performance at Montreal's Palais des Congrès. Eugene Poku was one of the opening acts. Around this time *New Energy* performed in various Montreal venues such as the Rendez-Vous Miller stage at the Olympic Stadium before baseball games, and other social and community events. Their busking on streets for small change was also done for an audience. In fact, the first time Bien-Aimé saw live breaking in the early nineties was not in a nightclub or on the streets, but on a stage. The formation of *Tactical* crew was in essence, according to Bien-Aimé, to create a mega-group for stage performances. In the nineties *Tactical* performed many times, opening for popular hip hop artists at music venues, as did *Flow Rock*. The imperative to create presentational dance routines for the stage is actually embedded in the *Battle of the Year* breaking competition, copied routinely by other competition events. In this format only four crews actually battle for the title of winner and runner up, the decision being based on the short danced sections or 'showcases' each crew has initially presented.

Initially, it seems as if the changes involved in presenting breaking on stage (both in Montreal and elsewhere) were subtle, simply a matter of re-orienting the dancer's movement outwards towards an audience rather than inwards towards the dancers. This is of course a natural imperative faced with the standard 'Italian' stage that opens only one face of a box to static viewers. The typical configuration for these early performances was for breakers to take solo turns while the others in the crew would stand at the back clapping or side stepping to the beat. Bien-Aimé describes this style of breaking performances in the early 1990s:

Back then, when we say performance on stage for b-boys, it's just like go and kick freestyle, you know? No concept, no showcasing. They just take a group

of young kids who know how to break and – just go, do your thing on the stage and pump the crowd and that’s it<sup>113</sup>.

Such an altering, Banes (1994a, 1998) argues, takes away from the social imperative of the dance, the face-to-face competition, the direct dialogic form as described in section 3.3.2. Instead of reacting to an opponent, the dancers react to a responsive audience.

Freestyle shows are also enhanced by the use of a loose structure of improvised solos balanced with brief moments of unison or group work. However this is no longer considered adequate for a stage performance by many Montreal breakers. Bien-Aimé insists that he would never improvise on stage<sup>114</sup> and Alsterlund states, “I think if you are doing improvisation at all (in a stage performance) it’s to take up time – it means that you ran out of ideas for choreography<sup>115</sup>?”

The art of choreography seems to have evolved amongst breakers, so that increasingly high standards are being set. Standard choreographic conventions are frequently used: a geometrical use of floor space in group choreographies, including pyramid configurations, perhaps inspired from video-style hip hop dance in music videos; moments of group unison; alternating solos while the rest of the group fades into the background and vertical pyramids in a freeze, with perhaps a gymnastic flip to punctuate it. This higher level of choreography in performances is called ‘showcasing’ by Bien-Aimé.

Many hip hop dance schools coordinate an end of the session performance. This final presentation not only serves to display the student’s skills and promote the school to potential clients, but it also provides an opportunity for the teachers, including those teaching breaking, to develop their skills as choreographers. It is questionable whether or not these examples of highly choreographed breaking are still strictly within the context of the vernacular.

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<sup>113</sup> Johnny Walker Bien-Aimé, interview with author, Montreal, March 7, 2006.

<sup>114</sup> Johnny Walker Bien-Aimé, interview with author, Montreal, March 7, 2006.

<sup>115</sup> K8 Alsterlund, interview with author, Montreal, March 18, 2006.

It is in these final examples that we find ourselves at the junction of two worlds and two systems, that of the vernacular dance and that of the performing arts. Defining this precipice is the heart of this research and will be addressed more fully in the discussion in chapter five.

### 3.5 When

To varying degrees I have found that all of the situations described above fit into Kealiinohomoku's definition of an 'extended dance event' (1976, p.237). Such a claim is most easily defended in the situation of the cypher at a nightclub, where the breaking is totally enmeshed in the larger event, and the boundaries between what Erving Goffman calls the 'game' or focused activity, and the 'spectacle', the activities that encase the 'game' are fluid (1974, p.261-264). The transitions in which a breaking circle forms out of a mass of dancing bodies and closes again are subtle and gradual.

This assessment is also easily defended in battle events where there is an official structure, a hierarchy in fact, of individuals who choose when the proceedings are to begin. These 'officials' are always at the mercy of various intangible factors, which seem to be related to the critical mass of the crowds. An event won't begin until the proper number of people, and perhaps until specific people, arrive. Breaking is not done exclusively during the official proceedings of a competition, rather cyphers invariably develop before (as a physical and artistic warm-up for the dancers) and after the structured battles. Cyphering will go on to the wee hours of the morning.

It has been my experience that the more exclusively breaking the event (i.e. not sharing the spotlight with other dance forms), the later it will start. For example I was well-advised to arrive at the *Bonnie and Clyde* battle (25 February 2006, Usine C) an hour earlier than its announced starting time in order to get a good spot on the edge of the circle. The official battle itself got underway after I had been sitting for an hour and a half, although a circle cypher had been in operation, intermittently and tentatively at first, for about an hour. Although battle rounds are timed in organized

battles it is telling that the limit often has to be enforced physically by the host inserting himself in between the battling dancers.

Fitting the freestyle stage performance into the category of an 'extended event' becomes somewhat harder to defend, in that there is a distinct beginning and ending to a given choreographic piece. The often social nature of these events, however, where the purpose is not only to see a performance but to socialize and perhaps to dance as well, allows me to consider many of these instances still 'extended'. Many breaking performances will occur on a bill with other performances, usually a musical performance. It is only relative to the stricter conventions of the performing arts stage that one can see that beginnings and endings are rather more fluid in this case. This will be taken up more fully in chapter five.

### **3.6 Why**

Breaking is an activity that seems to become obsessive, where dancers spend many hours a day training, sometimes repeating the same movement over and over again in order to perfect it. Breaking is not just an activity, for most breakers it is a way of life. What is it that compels a person to practice so intensely, attend late-night events regularly, and risk injury by participating in such a dance culture?

The answer to this question is not crystal clear, but can be deciphered to some degree by sifting through the many formal interviews and informal conversations undergone during this research and reaching a global impression. In particular, I have been struck with the amount of passion breakers express when they talk about their dance. Clearly this is a dance that operates on many psychological and physiological levels. It is at once a physical activity, a leisure activity, a social activity, and an artistic activity.

For some breakers the dance serves as a community and a passion that has kept them away from vices that may be otherwise alluring for kids with little to lose. Low-income minority youth often feel little respect for authority because they see the 'system' (police, schooling, etc.) as oppressive. Eugene Poku clearly states how

dancing in the 1970s helped him channel his anger when faced with the racism he encountered as a person of colour<sup>116</sup>. Bien-Aimé claims that breaking kept him away from the crime of ‘the ghetto’ and that it eventually took him back to school<sup>117</sup>. One can assume the same might be said for many breakers today. Breaking is an activity that has all the ‘edginess’ of street culture and the community of gang culture without being in itself an illegal activity. With so much energy funnelled into practising and with peers that validate the activity, there is simply no time for crime. Evidently community centres in low-income minority neighbourhoods offer breaking classes with the notion that breaking provides some kind of antidote to the conditions for the youth in these areas.

Breaking allows youth to engage the body in an extremely physical activity without having to conform to organized and institutionalized sports. Youth gain social cachet through breaking and its association with hip hop and popular culture. The dance is both individualistic, allowing rebellious teens to express themselves, and serves as a community of common interest, giving youth a sense of belonging. The competitive nature of breaking makes it appealing to boys who otherwise would reject being identified as a dancer. The very real aggression of the battle serve as a means to remain ‘manly’ despite what in mainstream society is perceived as a ‘feminine’ activity.

Not happy to simply look pretty on the sidelines, more and more women are taking the bruises and learning the challenging moves of breaking. They are also participating in battles, and sometimes even winning against men. Breaking is both a physical and mental challenge for women who have been traditionally not welcome in the breaking cypher. K8 Alsterlund states that her interests were always towards extreme sports such as competitive skiing and skateboarding – breaking was a way for her to marry her interest in the extreme and her interest in dance. The Africanist

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<sup>116</sup> Eugene Poku, interview with author, Montreal, March 27, 2006.

<sup>117</sup> Johnny Walker Bien-Aimé, interview with author, Montreal, March 7, 2006.

and hip hop aesthetic of breaking is likely more appealing to some women over ballet and modern dance because it breaks with expected roles and female stereotypes. However the form is definitely more accessible to women today because of the earlier female pioneers who can act as role models and, through teaching, can create 'safe' training spaces.

Breaking is both artistic expression, therefore satisfying an individual's creative needs, and physical expression, satisfying the cardio-vascular, the high one gets from intense exercise. Its solo, competitive format gives individuals the opportunity to be the centre of attention, judged and encouraged, even if only for a short moment, even if only among peers. This validation is an essential component to the dance's appeal. Its rebellious style appeals to youth, especially those feeling the need to express their anger and frustrations. It is a site for empowerment, for pride of self, of one's generation and sense of style, of one's ethnic roots.

These motivations, however, may not be enough to sustain a lifetime of interest in breaking. Unlike contemporary dancers, breakers cannot aspire to make dancing their 'profession'. One does not take up the dance for its financial rewards. Commercial gigs are very few and far between, and often underpaid. Breaking is not a profession that gives anyone any kind of financial security. It is only in the last decade that breakers, and only the more experienced ones at that, can receive any kind of financial reward through dancing, whether it is through performing or teaching. A large majority of breakers must treat breaking as a secondary activity to other day-to-day activities such as school or regular employment.

How conscious are breakers in the vernacular context of the historical import of breaking? First and second generation of breakers in Montreal (and elsewhere) particularly take heed to pay homage to the 'foundations' of the breaking and other street dances in giving recognition to its early innovators. This is demonstrated in the fact that the OG (original generation) occasionally offer master classes or lectures. For example, the *Hip Hop Symposium* invited Popmaster Jorge Fable Papon, member of the *Rock Steady* crew, to give a master class in locking and popping and to present

his lecture 'The Great Hip Hop Swindle' (3<sup>rd</sup> edition, March 14 2004). However, these events are not generally well attended, so it is arguable that most breakers are, as Nahachewsky puts it, "more involved in the cultural processes of the present and the role of this dancing in their everyday life as a person..." (2001, p.24-25). The people who are conscious of breaking's place in history often operate behind the scenes, sometimes the teachers, especially in the community centres where there is a consciousness of fostering pride in self for youth at risk.

There is however a more popular discourse around authenticity, or, in the vernacular, of 'keeping it real', or 'keeping it ghetto' that permeates the hip hop scene across the board. What qualifies something as real or ghetto is difficult to pinpoint. It may refer to a quality of movement; a 'rawness' as Quijada would put it, rather than a historical significance. The term is thrown about, but not often cogently substantiated. One such example is evident in the discourse during the commentary in the DVD version of the movie *You Got Served* (Stokes 2004). There was a constant reference to the desire to 'keep it real' despite the irony that the dancing was a bizarre amalgam of fully choreographed hip hop dance forms, made to look as if they were improvised.

### **3.7 Chapter conclusion**

This chapter has been a brief survey of the Montreal underground breaking scene. It is an overview of the divergent activities, locations and individuals that make up that scene. This reality ranges from the very personal to the public. Through Kealiinohomoku's five categories of who, what, where, when and why, issues of aesthetic ideology, reproducibility, transmission, and consciousness were addressed.



## CHAPTER 4

### BREAKING IN PERFORMING ARTS CONTEXTS

#### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter addresses breaking in performing arts contexts in Montreal. The material for this chapter is built around the research conducted in two case studies on contemporary dance companies that incorporate breaking into their movement vocabulary. Victor Quijada is the choreographer of *RBDG*, while *Solid State* is directed by a collective.

The subsequent major sections are the same as in the previous chapter: who, what, where, when and why. The content, their sub-section titles and the weight of information in each of these sections are different than in the previous chapter for reasons that are evident. For example, aesthetics of style and form in vernacular breaking is consistent with vernacular African American dance, while style aesthetics in contemporary dance fusions are much more individual to the choreographer or company.

#### **4.2 Who**

##### **4.2.1 Dance-makers**

A major distinction between breaking in the street dance context and in the context of a contemporary dance piece is that of the 'dance-maker'. In contemporary dance a person or group of people signs their name to a particular creation, there is

‘authorship’. This person is generally called the ‘choreographer’. Their names are recorded as such in the evening program and other places (season program, articles, etc.).

The Choreographer is typically a leader who directs all aspects of the dance making. This person has a vision for a given piece, making sure that there is an Aristotelian beginning, middle and end, and internal coherence. Not only is the dance-maker ultimately responsible for the structure of the piece, (who goes where, what movements they do and when), the dance-maker is also responsible for innovating a signature movement style or approach to choreography. As discussed in section 1.4.3.4, this valuing of original creative genius is intrinsic to this Western concept of the artist. An implicit hierarchy is built into the contemporary dance milieu in which the choreographer is considered by virtue of their unique genius, more important than the dancer, who, it might be thought, simply executes the movement, supposedly without creative input.

Post-modern artists such as Benoît Lachambre and Lynda Gaudreau have challenged their romantic inheritance of this structure somewhat by creating pieces based on structured improvisations and ‘borrowed’ or shared artistry. However, the title of choreographer still holds a strong place in our collective unconscious. It is the high-profile names of these individuals that still mark a dance event. The title of choreographer or its equivalent gives particular artists access to very tangible benefits such as the possibility of support for artistic creation in the form of arts funding.

The choreographer is often also a director of a company, responsible for the overall vision of a body of work that makes up that person’s repertoire of creations. The duties of the choreographer are on the one hand artistic: creating and sequencing movement, choosing dancers, finding collaborators, etc, and on the other administrative: finding funding, registering as a non-profit corporation, etc, at least until the artist has the financial resources to hire someone else to do so.

This performing arts ‘dance-maker’ has a very singular control over a dance. This approach applies to a ‘dance piece’ defined in time and place, not to an ongoing

body of movement or dance form. It represents a very different kind of individualism from that of the street breaker. It is a predetermined and inflexible hierarchy rather than a fluid and potentially instable one characteristic of the crew in vernacular contexts.

Victor Quijada is a good example of the choreographic kind of individual leadership. He has created a movement style, which is very distinctively his, no matter whose body it is danced by. He takes complete control and responsibility for the movement he creates. He doesn't believe in having the dancers improvise either in the creative process or in performance.

*Solid State* was an alternative to this model. The group initially created a collective, so that the members share authorship of each piece. However, over time the collective process evolved and eventually dissolved. In early pieces each member, at least on principle, took part in dancing, choreographing and administrative duties equally. The choreography was built through a painstakingly long consensus process in which every collective member was participating. *Solid State* member Dana Schnitzer recounts, "Let's say we want to do something like the group sweeps across the stage here. Ten people have to agree. And ten people had to have come up with that idea in a way"<sup>118</sup>. By general consensus, after their third major piece, *Etch-a-sketch* (Tangente, March 2003), this process was no longer working. It was stressful and slow. Their following creation, *It's Not You... It's Me* (Tangente, October 2006)<sup>119</sup> demonstrated a marked change. In the creation process for this piece the group broke into smaller groups in order to create sections which they put together collectively late in the process. This device also catered to the desires of certain group members who wished to express a more individual creative voice. This individual authorship was reflected clearly in the second version of *Not You*, (Tangente, January 2006), when the choreography was credited to only four members of what was still

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<sup>118</sup> Dana Schnitzer, interview with author, November 13, 2004.

<sup>119</sup> Hereafter this piece will be referred to as *Not You*.

called the *Solid State Breakdance Collective*<sup>120</sup>. In all previous pieces the choreography had been credited simply as collective. So while the original intentions of the group were to challenge the hierarchical model of dance-creation, experience has led them to re-appropriate that model, albeit informed by their experience as a collective.

I would characterize both Victor Quijada and the *Solid State* women as having hybrid identities, with physical training and experience in both street breaking and theatrical dance contexts. Quijada began dancing as a street dancer in Los Angeles and has continued to dance in circle cyphers in nightclubs throughout his years as a professional concert dancer in post-modern and classical ballet forms up until recently. For several of the *Solid State* members the process has been the reverse, who trained as breakers after they had graduated from the Concordia Dance Department with training in choreography<sup>121</sup>. Training in each of the forms involved in this fusion is only part of the picture of being able to claim membership in the performing arts and vernacular domains. Both Quijada and *Solid State* have fielded criticism mainly from the breaking community, for not fitting into the box, or 'representing' in that community.

Because the *Solid State* dancers are women and include a majority of unmistakably white members, they don't fulfil many people's expectations of what a breaker should be. They have often been asked to prove their 'street credibility' and been criticized for taking the limelight away from more technically skilled groups<sup>122</sup>.

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<sup>120</sup> Subsequent to this performance the group no longer asserted itself as a collective. A third version of this piece toured in 2006-2007.

<sup>121</sup> These include Claudia Fancello, JoDee Allen, Ame Henderson and K8 Alsterlund (the latter two left the collective early on.) Members Helen Simard, Danielle Rankin and Emmanuelle Lê Phan later received their Bachelors of Fine Arts from the same institution.

<sup>122</sup> This sentiment was never verbalized in any interview I conducted, but seemed to be a general attitude, one that *Solid State* members were aware of and defensive against.

While many members did battle with *DFS* and as individuals, other members did not like to battle, and *Solid State* dance pieces often poke fun at the machismo of battles. Allen and Simard, the current Artistic Directors of *Solid State*, only battle occasionally now, focusing their energies on company activities, teaching dance and hosting events through their business Studio Sweatshop. The impression that the group does not enjoy the battle feeds criticism against them. Former member K8 Alsterlund (b-girl Lynx) believes that, “the nature of breaking is competitive. If you can’t get into the circle and compete and represent, with the guys, you are not going to be respected. That’s the essence of it<sup>123</sup>.” However, the focus on battling as a mark of authenticity is also challenged within the community.

While *Solid State* members might struggle to be accepted in the vernacular breaking community, Quijada, on the other hand, does look the part of a b-boy. He is an attractive Mexican-American with smouldering Latin eyes and an assertive though boyish presence. Since his arrival in Montreal in 2000 he has frequented bars that were known for freestyle cyphers, not hesitating to jump in. However, since his career as a choreographer has taken off in recent years, it is unclear to what extent he still attends breaking events. Even in vernacular contexts, Quijada dances his own brand of breaking that clearly departs from the foundational form. This has probably garnered some criticism, judging from the defensive tone in the following quote:

I don’t wear hip hop clothes and I don’t do hip hop moves that you see on the fucking video – that you buy at Target and learn it and shit. Me, just my hunger and my attack and my the way that I live my life is – whatever that you want to call hip hop, the nastiness and the dirtiness and whatever in your face shit about hip hop<sup>124</sup>.

While *Solid State* members and Quijada may claim to have hybrid identities, there is still the question of who these dance-makers of breaking in performing arts contexts are not. None of Montreal’s founding or highly respected breakers are

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<sup>123</sup> K8 Alsterlund, interview with author, Montreal, March 18, 2006.

<sup>124</sup> Victor Quijada, interview with author, Montreal, March 24, 2005.

choreographers in any of the city's more successful contemporary dance companies. This non-inclusion of keystone crews or dancers in the nexus of coveted emerging contemporary dance choreographers alongside Quijada and *Solid State* is striking when you compare the Montreal picture with that of France, where indeed it seems to be the most experienced breakers that have become professional choreographers.

Members of *Flow Rock* and *Tactical* crews, for example have taken on the role of choreographer in very few situations. *Tactical* performed a short piece alongside other contemporary dance companies (such as *Flak*, *O' Vertigo* and *La La La Human Steps*) at a major stage in the Place des Arts complex for the *Festival en Lumière* in 2001 (this performance was filmed for television broadcast by Amerimage-Spectra Inc.). *Flow Rock* presented a 45-minute work at the prestigious jazz festival *Nancy Jazz Pulsations* in France in 2001. Four members of *Flow Rock* (Natasha Jean-Bart, Gilbert Baptiste, Clauter Alexandre and Éric Martel) joined French popper Ismaël Mouaraki in 2002 to create *Destins croisés*, sharing some choreographic responsibilities. In 2002 the group was invited by Louis Robitaille, artistic director of *Les Ballets Jazz de Montréal*, to share their Parc Lafontaine stage in order to present their first work in progress. In 2003 they presented the complete work *Futur Proche* at le Maison de la Culture Frontenac as part of the *Définition non applicable* event.

Despite this initial exposure and interaction with the world of contemporary dance, Montreal's top street dancers did not secure more than a peripheral presence in that world. Since these brief instances detailed above, neither *Destins croisés* nor *Tactical* have ever presented evening-length choreographies in exclusively contemporary dance venues in Montreal. Neither one has received funding from the arts councils. This lack of integration or patronage likely in large part due to reticence on their part towards soliciting dance presenters and inexperience in regards to the bureaucracy and procedures of applying for grants. In contrast both *Solid State* and *RBDG* have had ongoing presentation opportunities from Tangente and other

presenters, and have to varying degrees successfully navigated the world of arts funding<sup>125</sup>.

#### 4.2.2 Dancing participants

While dance-makers of the fusion dance creations may require a hybrid identity, they may have difficulties in finding dancers with similar hybrid backgrounds and training. As suggested by Anthony Shay (1999) in relation to State folk dance companies, training in performing contexts requires a broader sourcing than dancers of a particular vernacular (folk or popular) style dancing in a community context. Often performing dancers are required to draw on a wider range of the vernacular styles as well as a performing arts dance technique, e.g. ballet or modern dance.

The problem of finding appropriately trained dancers to work with has been an issue for Quijada from the start. Before 2005 *Solid State* collective members were the only performers of their creations, after that time they too hired dancers. Most of Quijada's dancers are either trained performing arts dancers (ballet or contemporary) or skilled street breakers. He has been left with the task of having to train each type of dancer towards some kind of middle zone. He states:

Through my choreography I train the dancers. So you'll see the breakers in the choreography – always [in] ballet lines and contemporary movement. The contemporary dancers – always [in] break movement, always on the floor. I'm always pushing them, training them. For the whole process I'm always pushing them towards the other side. So the ballet dancers never get to do a long straight leg, and the breakers never get to do what they are good at, so everybody's frustrated<sup>126</sup>.

There are other challenges created by this disparity of training in dancers. Often street breakers are not 'down with' the codes of conduct of working towards a professional dance piece. Quijada began his company wanting to work with the very

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<sup>125</sup> *Solid State* has received only one project grant from the Canada Council of the Art. *RBDG*, on the other hand, receives provincial operating funding.

<sup>126</sup> Victor Quijada, interview with author, Montreal, March 24, 2005.

‘raw’ dancers that he met in the nightclubs, but quickly discovered that many of them were not interested in respecting theatrical codes. He was faced with a conflict of values: the imposed discipline of the concert dance world (follow rules, take direction, schedules, etc.) versus the self-discipline & self-motivation of perfecting breaking moves. He states:

There is this un-disciplined discipline in the hip hop world, break dance world. They are very disciplined because if you want to get an air flare then you better fucking discipline your ass and practice that shit. But when you practice, how you practice, how many times you do it, did you warm up? Nah, I just fucking came. ... I had a group that was five guys, raw as fuck. Now, Jayko was the last of the Mohicans, he was the last raw guy<sup>127</sup>.

From within the breaking community, Johnny Walker Bien-Aimé (aka Skywalker) validates this reality through his own attempts at creating pieces: “We have a hard time producing work because of our egocentric personalities and as a result, we can’t create choreographies together” (Laabidi 2005b, p.22).

This situation is likely as much a conflict of goals as of values. *Solid State* has similarly lost members because some were not committed to the goal of creating dance pieces. Some early members were apparently just along for a fun ride, showing up for photo shoots but not for rehearsals, according to several members. Others just changed priorities along the way<sup>128</sup>. Those left have a very strong commitment to both contemporary dance creation and to the breaking movement style.

Quijada looks forward to a time in the near future when dancers will be trained equally in both street and elite dance forms, and believes these will be the perfect dancers for his type of fusion work. This future might be closer than he thinks:

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<sup>127</sup> Victor Quijada, interview with author, Montreal, March 24, 2005. In fact, subsequent to this statement Quijada has worked with one of his early collaborators, *RedMask* crew member Joe Danny Aurélien (Dingo).

<sup>128</sup> Alsterlund left the collective for other reasons, but remains committed to both breaking and contemporary dance expressions. K8 Alsterlund, interview with author, Montreal, March 18, 2006; Claudia Fancello, interview with author, Montreal, November 23, 2004; Dana Schnitzer, interview with author, Montreal, November 13, 2004.



Quijada hired *Solid State* member Emmanuelle Lê Phan to dance in his piece *Slicing Static* (September 2004, Usine C).

But what might still be missing in these dancers is the quality of edginess that comes from dancing out of necessity, of carving a space out of the urban or ghetto landscape in order to practice, a quality that you might not get from studio-trained dancers. While most novice breakers do now learn the basics in the studio, it will be essential for them to continue their training in the circle cypher and in battles, in order to retain a sense of all that it means to be 'street'.

#### **4.2.3 Non-dancing participants**

In the contemporary dance event, the primary non-dancing participants are the spectators. The audience is essential to the construction of the event, in that a dance piece is created in order to be seen by an audience. Without an audience to witness the creation, the event loses all logic and is considered a failure. The acceptance or rejection of the work by the audience defines whether or not the work was successful or not. Generally spectators pay a fee to witness the performance. This judgment is therefore often measured in box office sales. The almost silent presence of the audience, punctuated by hand clapping at the end of the performance is a very essential form of participation.

Contemporary dance events are generally attended by individuals familiar with contemporary art, the types of locations that house this art, and the social codes associated with such locations. Pieces that fuse dance techniques coming from outside of this milieu draw audiences from communities that are not necessarily familiar or comfortable with this aesthetic, the locations and its codes of conduct. Often younger and more vocally participatory audience members attend contemporary dance performances including street dance movement, creating an interesting mix with the more reserved spectators.

In her unpublished doctoral thesis, Dena Davida examines the various behind-the-scenes roles that are involved in the presentation of a contemporary dance event.

These individuals are also essential non-dancing participants. Under the direction of the choreographer there exist artistic roles, including the rehearsal director and artistic collaborators (set, costume, lighting designers). There is also an administrative role, involved in tasks such as writing grants and reports, keeping the books and negotiating contracts. There are also roles that are not part of the artistic production per-se, but none-the-less enable the production. Davida calls these the 'expressive specialists' (2007, p.175). These include the journalists, dance writers and broadcasters who provide media coverage of the event and are often key players in the event's public reception. It includes officers of arts funding bodies and their juries where they exist, who are complicit in the event through their financing of it. It also includes those employed by the presenting organization, the administrators who coordinate the event, the press agent who communicates with journalists and technical staff who operate the theatre. Most notable is the artistic director who makes important artistic choices when selecting which artists and dance companies he/she will present. Without this very essential endorsement, the artist would not become known to a public, would not develop a body of work, would not persevere. In short, the artist would have no choreographic career.

### **4.3 What**

#### **4.3.1 Aesthetics in breaking performances**

##### **4.3.1.2 Aesthetic ideology**

Despite the inclusion of breaking movements and movement aesthetics, contemporary dance events that contain breaking referents remain in the framework of the Western concept or ideology of 'high art'. They are defined by the context in which they are experienced, and the context remains that of a theatre and the relationships that entails. The contemporary dance piece remains 'an end in itself' (Kealiinohomoku 1976, p.237) in contrast to the interactive environment of the street breaking event, and no matter how much it may be inspired by that vernacular context.

Implicit to the creation of a performing arts dance piece is that there is an elaborate thematic content that gives the piece cohesion. Themes are revealed in the text that surrounds a work: the title, the program and press information. In contemporary dance, the personal is often universalized, so that autobiographical fragments are framed as psychological or sociological problematics. Issues of construction are also often addressed as a central theme. Many times the artist(s) create a piece without having an entirely coherent sense of what the piece is 'about'. It is sometimes later, on reflection, that the dominant theme becomes clear.

Each of the pieces that have been created by *Solid State* and *RBDG* has in some sense a theme or themes, whether abstract or conceptual. However press material must be produced often before the piece is completed, in order to give journalists a sense of the work. For example, the press release for Quijada's *Slicing Static* (September 2004, Usine C) states that the piece "questions the mechanics of freedom and action, and suggests the possibility that we enjoy our independence or stand in its way... this work reveals man's constant refusal to liberate himself from his own psychological imprisonment" (Quijada 2004b). Similarly, *Solid State's* press kit states that *Not You* (October 2004, Tangente) "explores situations of confrontation and the expression of ego. ... The show challenges the audience's perceptions and expectations of breakdance and demonstrates the versatility of this group of fierce female performers" (Allen, Fancello, Lê Phan, Rankin, Schnitzer, & Simard 2005).

A current trend in post-modern creation is to question this coherence of central theme and a clear beginning, middle and end. Shusterman proposes that post-modern artists seek to create a "schizophrenic fragmentation" and "collage effect" which includes "... dismantling the pre-packaged and wearily familiar into something stimulatingly different" (2000, p.65). This trend is linked to a trend in theatre which strips bare the illusion of the theatre, so that the pretence of creating a fantasy world is replaced with self-consciousness attention deliberately drawn to the mechanisms at work behind-the-scenes. This questioning in dance harkens back to the 1960s and the work of Judson Church, but is also very popular in European contemporary dance, in

what Isabelle Ginot calls *nouvelles formes* (2003). In this trend, a critical regard towards the aesthetic, political and economic functions of art are paramount. In this mode dance artists create dance that “emerges from its so-called essential mutism and takes the theorization of their works into their own hands<sup>129</sup>” (FTBA, Ginot 2003, p.4).

Quijada and *Solid State* can't necessarily be categorized into the likes of Benoit Lachambre, Boris Charmatz and Jerome Bel who personify this type of post-modern dance creator, but they are no doubt influenced by this critical trend in contemporary dance creation. In the first version of *Not You*, the various poorly linked sections were, by the second version, reassumed as very clearly defined and labelled 'tableaux'. The idea of a unified artwork with a definitive through-line seems to have been eschewed, perhaps characterizing this piece as post-modern. Or the clear sectioning was perhaps a practical solution, a way to salvage a weak dance piece.

For his part, Quijada has very consciously set out to question and deconstruct the so-called 'rules' of theatrical dance. One of his central objectives in creating each new choreographic creation is to propose new approaches to this problem. Quijada states:

I think I'm trying to learn everything I can about presentation, choreography, the audience-performer relationship, the performer-performer relationship, the audience-audience relationship, everything that can happen in the theatre, all the rules that go with putting dance together, putting dance on stage or presenting it, in some way shape or form. And all the rules around it so that I can tear it up and twist it and break them<sup>130</sup>.

However, all questioning of the theatrical ideology of contemporary dance within choreographic constructions is limited by the fact that the creations for the most part ultimately take place in the theatre. As such, they are tied to restrictions and modes in order to fit into the structure in place. Any work towards creating a dis-unified

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<sup>129</sup> “... la danse sort de son mutisme prétendu essentiel (...) et prennent en main la théorisation de leur travail...”

<sup>130</sup> Victor Quijada, interview with author, Montréal, March 24, 2005.

creation is still unified by the fact that it takes place in the same time and space and by the same group of performers, and by the same (group of) choreographer(s). The capitalist imperative asks that contemporary dance workers be paid for their time and effort, therefore tickets must be sold and fundraising such as grant writing must be undertaken. Financers generally require that a performance must be mounted for an audience and in a recognized venue. In her article “Un lieu commun,” Ginot describes such contradictions of artists of the *nouvelles formes* who both seek and repel or critique patronage (2003, p.4).

#### **4.3.1.2 Aesthetics of style**

Generalizations regarding the movement signature or style of contemporary dance pieces are impossible, as each company defines itself over time with a unique aesthetic, and each piece within its body of work is also (to a lesser degree) distinct. Both *Solid State* and Victor Quijada have carved out their characteristic choreographic styles and approaches to dance piece making that distinguish them. *Solid State*'s approach to movement is distinctively compact, bouncy, and rhythmic. In contrast, Quijada's signature movement is the push-pull suspension/collapse of his partner work, a kind of risk-taking similar to freestyle breaking, as if the floor is being replaced by another dancer.

##### **4.3.1.2.1 Challenging breaking form**

Mere reproduction of breaking movement would not suffice for choreographers in contemporary dance – it is the original mutations of the form that set them apart as being unique, as having that original creative genius. Quijada is very comfortable with moulding breaking vocabulary and form to suit his choreographic needs. In contrast, Schnitzer admits that it was easier for *Solid State* collective members with contemporary dance backgrounds to depart from the rules of breaking when they attempted the more radical deconstructive choreography in *Not You*, than it was for those without. Schnitzer's movement training is in gymnastics and breaking, and as

the following quote demonstrates, it was very challenging for her to participate in such a process. She describes this struggle in the following statement:

I never would have been able to take the risk that I did in doing something like that if it wasn't for these girls telling me every single day 'it's okay'. And if they didn't tell me, like five times a day, I would start shrinking. Because it took a lot to do that. Because it was breaking with the form a lot. To do what I did you would never do in a circle, never. Unless you wanted to get your ass kicked. ... [The others] were itching to [do that] for a long time, to get out of the '5-6-7-8' square grid, to break that. Definitely a long time. I didn't even ever consider it. My goal was to get better. To be able to do these moves like any guy. And to be able to do any move one way and then the other way. On my good leg and then on my bad leg. If I could just get these simple moves well, then I'm happy<sup>131</sup>.

Form manipulation however remains a very strong component of the *Solid State* choreographies, especially under the direction of Allen and Simard.

#### 4.3.1.2.2 Rhythm

Rhythm is generally undeveloped in contemporary dance. Contemporary dance typically has a strained relationship to music, having a desire to assert its independence from the ballet and modern dance tradition of interpreting the music. The trend in contemporary is to use original abstract and un-rhythmic soundscape, or even silence.

*Solid State*, in contrast, often works with very rhythmic music, sometimes with a live DJ. In *Etch-a-sketch* (Tangente, 2003) it might even be said that polyrhythms were created in the layering of dancers rhythmic movement. *Solid State* member Claudia Fancello states how her initial desire to choreograph to the rhythmic music of hip hop was in conflict with her training in contemporary dance:

[Concordia] was really in your head and creative-based, choreographic-based. So I was just looking at that point of a way of physically challenging myself, and also still having a real love for rhythm-based dance that was not really nurtured in the program – fully discouraged<sup>132</sup>.

<sup>131</sup> Dana Schnitzer, interview with author, Montreal, November 13, 2004.

<sup>132</sup> Claudia Fancello, interview with author, Montreal, November 23, 2004.

*Solid State's* use of rhythmic music is therefore a radical step away from the Concordia contemporary dance training many of the members received. Quijada's *Slicing Static*, on the other hand, was supported by a very minimalist, ambient sound score composed specifically for the dance work by Mitchell Akiyama, an electronic music composer. The dialogic relationship between music and movement was likely very much a part of the process of creation of each. However the music was recorded in its final version, leaving no room for original 'conversation' in performance. The music created a sparse, meditational atmosphere that was at times counterbalanced by more rhythmic movement, but more often matched by lyrical movement and more static moments.

#### 4.3.1.2.3 Female ephebism

*Solid State*, especially in their earlier work, express a powerful, youthful, 'ephebic' energy. In particular, they present confident, powerful female bodies, a characteristic that is directly related to their feminism and relates to Claudia's experience of hip hop dancing influenced by the back-up dancers on music videos and the *Fly Girls* from *In Living Color* (Wayans 1990-1994). She describes this dancing as a "super physical, super sexy dance. It wasn't about girls being pretty on the side, it was in your face, sweaty and rocking out. Totally. Big movement. So that was an inspiration for me<sup>133</sup>."

This aesthetic celebrates the full female body, not necessarily pretty, not the verging on anorexic body of an elegant fashion-model and not the Western classical dancer's ethereal body either, but a full and powerful body in charge of her own sexuality. It also represents a desire to act as a strong role model for younger people. States Fancello:

[Our work is also about] getting young people, boys and girls excited about dance. That's what I love about the reaction to the work. [They are seeing]

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<sup>133</sup> Claudia Fancello, interview with author, Montreal, November 23, 2004.

girls who are pure clowns, yes being women on stage, doing a kind of feminine dance, but at the same time, being clowns and being ugly, being ridiculous<sup>134</sup>.

This goal relates *Solid State* to what French writer Claudine Moïse's identifies as key 'hip hop values,' those of "respect of others, engagement of self, positive outlook on life<sup>135</sup>," (FTBA 1998, p.122). However, while most of their creations work in the vein of female empowerment and playfulness through the use of comedy and parody, in *Not You*, there was an attempt to touch on more sober, contemplative moods.

#### 4.3.1.2.4 Aesthetic contrasts

Quijada 'embraces the conflict' (Dixon-Gottschild 1995) in his fusion of the contrasting forms of ballet and breaking. Simply put, while classical ballet tends to be vertical, linear, and lyrical, breaking is grounded, angular, and rhythmic. Quijada very accurately states, "I always say that, especially classical break and classical ballet, are the exact opposites of each other – everything is inverted, up is down, absolutely<sup>136</sup>." Quijada borrows elements of each form (the lifts of ballet elaborating on the partner work of breaking, the floorwork of breaking developed into adages, elongated limbs still angular) to create a unique style, characterized by a driving fluidity constantly pushing the movement forward. A momentum is built moving between up and down, push and pull, release and suspension. This fusion of contrasting elements parallels Shusterman's concept of 'appropriative sampling' characteristic of the hip hop aesthetic as, "it cannibalizes and combines what it wants with no concern to preserve the formal integrity, aesthetic intention, or historical context of [that which it] plunders, absorbing and transforming everything it cuts and takes into its funky collage" (2000, p.71).

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<sup>134</sup> Claudia Fancello, interview with author, Montreal, November 23, 2004.

<sup>135</sup> "... respect des autres, engagement de soi, regard positif sur la vie..."

<sup>136</sup> Victor Quijada, interview with author, Montreal, March 24, 2005.



Quijada's fusion of ballet and black social dance is not an original pairing. It has been attempted in countless movies, from *Flashdance* (Lyne 1983) to *Save the Last Dance* (Carter 2001), generally in the closing dance sequences. It might also be compared more fairly to ballet choreographer George Balanchine and the incorporation of Africanist elements to his work, as described by Dixon-Gottschild in the following quote:

Significant is the underlying speed, vitality, energy, coolness, and athletic intensity that are fundamental to [Balanchine's] Americanization of ballet. The tale continues with the radical dynamics, off-center weight shifts, and unexpected mood and attitude changes in Balanchine's work that create a high-affect juxtaposition of elements uncommon in traditional but basic to Africanist dance (1995, p.117).

Where Balanchine borrowed attack in musicality and angularity of limbs from black dance to nuance his ballet choreography, Quijada seems to be working in the opposite direction, softening and elongating the limbs of breaking, his movement sliding over the music. While Balanchine took ballet down to the ground, Victor takes breaking up off the lower level. For example, his dancer Jayko Eloï's solo at the beginning of *Slicing Static* has him moving in the vertical plane using an impulse of fall and recovery as in breaking. Like a boxer strung up by an invisible force by his fist, he was never quite allowed to return to familiar movement close to the floor.

### **4.3.2 Form**

#### **4.3.2.1 Composition**

Breaking form in theatrical contexts is closely related to its aesthetics of ideology previously discussed. The structure provided by the theatre indelibly shapes the artistic creation performed within. The goal is inevitably to present a prepared final product. The dancing is structured to include a clear beginning, middle and end to help define and contain it in time and space. The choreography is constructed to depend on other dimensions such as sound, lighting, staging and costuming design.

In ideal circumstances, a choreographer benefits from extensive creation and rehearsal time in order to create, set and perfect a piece that can be reproduced in almost exactly the identical way each time it is performed. Minor adjustments may be made as locations change to adapt to varying stage dimensions, but otherwise no intentional modifications will be made from representation to representation. Dancers learn not only a particular movement vocabulary distinctive to the choreographer, but a particular fixed sequencing of this vocabulary. The dancers commit the movement to memory so that they will be able to perform it over and over again in relatively stable form. Interaction with other dancers and design elements is carefully worked out to achieve the exact design desired by the choreographer (or agreed upon by the choreographic group). This is the aspect of fixedness referred to in section 1.5.2 on reproducibility, a quality diametrically opposed to improvisation.

The irony of the composed and fixed choreography is that it must be committed so deeply to memory, that in performance it seems genuinely spontaneous. Remarkable dancers retain an ability to exude the aura that they are discovering each moment as it presents itself, rather than anticipating repeated movement. This principle is actually very parallel to the paradox of improvised dances where the challenge is to know the technique so thoroughly in order to appear to forget the technique.

Throughout the later stages of the compositional process, interaction with other design elements such as lighting, costuming and stage design help build the piece and give it a definable structure. For example, Quijada's *Slicing Static* was created in residency at Usine C using their modular seating. This allowed Quijada to compose the piece based on a particular and unusual configuration of the risers and seats. A section involving dancer Anne Plamondon moving through the underside of the riser structure as if it was a jungle gym was particularly effective. What made this use of the space doubly effective was the lighting design by Yan Lee Chan, prepared specifically to highlight dramatic moments, in almost a cinematographic effect, for example the swinging light making us think of an interrogation room.

*Solid State* generally does not use elaborate props or unusual stage design. In *Not You* (Tangente, October 2004) a small horse trophy was used in one section. They collaborated with lighting designer Ame Henderson to create a visual environment and they prefaced the performance with a projected video piece designed by absentee collective member Pamela 'Miss Chiva' Schneider. For *Showdown* (Tangente 2001, MAI 2002) and *Etch-a-sketch* (Tangente 2003, and others) they were able to collaborate with emerging lighting designer Yan Lee Chan.

Costume design is very often a very subtle component of the design collaboration. In *Slicing Static*, RBDG dancers were dressed in neutral tones, clothing that looked as if it was carefully chosen off the rack at Jacobs or the Gap. A local fashion designer Caroline Boisvert, is credited as the production's 'stylist'. The costuming for *Not You* (Tangente, October 2004), in contrast looked as if it was a last-minute collective effort. The gaudy colours and mismatched stripes on stretch fabrics, often with unflattering cuts, revealed a lack of funds for such details, despite a veiled justification in the evening program's artistic statement, to indulge in uglier or 'waack' possibilities.

Final moments of the creation process bring all of these elements together so that they reliably coincide temporally: the music, interaction between dancers, the lighting, each and every time the same way. This is not to say there is no dialogue between these elements or individuals in the moment of performance, but that leeway is extremely small.

#### **4.3.2.2 Use of improvisation in theatrical breaking**

Despite some experimentation with chance and improvisation in theatrical dance the 1960s and 1970s, improvisation in the final, performed choreography is rare. Some contemporary dance artists, for example Andrew de L. Harwood, still use improvisation devices in performance, but by and large a stigma is still associated with improvisation in performance. It is perhaps seen as an easy way out of doing the 'real work' of choreography. Certainly, a choreographer does not have as much

control over the final work if improvisation is incorporated into the piece. In the case studies of this work, the two companies have two distinct approaches and attitudes towards improvisation.

*Solid State* uses improvisation extensively in its creative process, along with more formal exercises of dismantling traditional breaking movement and reconfiguration of standard breaking moves. Quijada, in contrast, claims he does not use improvisation during the creative process. Instead he composes directly onto the dancer, letting the movement arise through that interaction. He states:

Everything I create is on that person in front of me. So I'm going to take the shape of what am I trying to do with that person, not just have an idea for what I want to do. It's like – I have Anne in front of me, so, what I want to do through her, what I want to do through him. What I want to do through her and I need to push her there, so that's where we are going. Or vice-versa with whoever. Usually if I trust what I'm supposed to be doing, then it will really easily start to show me what needs to be said. What needs to be explored, what needs to be transmitted<sup>137</sup>.

*Solid State* has used structured choreographies in its pieces. In *Not You* their solos were developed into longer sections, which gave them room to develop their individual interpretation and freestyle within the given structure. Where *Solid State* has departed from the standard breaking moves you can see the mechanism of the construction, in almost text-book-like exercises: sectioning, repetition, inversions. They occasionally insert standard breaking movement to create humorous, theatrical scenarios. For example, in the second version of *Not You*, they make fun of the competitive b-boying of battles by replicating in two very different critical sequences or skits. In one tableau titled 'Breakdance Dream' two 'b-boys' do a standard uprock in unison, while Helen Simard, in contrast is adapting toprocks while lying prone on the floor. It is as if she is asleep, sleep dancing, and the two others are her imagined tormentors. In a later tableau JoDee Allen parodies an egocentric b-girl who won't

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<sup>137</sup> Victor Quijada, interview with author, Montreal, March 24, 2005.

stop showing off her moves. In most of their pieces they also drew from other vernacular dance styles, such as the upright footwork of house dance.

#### **4.4 Where**

The ideal location of breaking and contemporary dance fusions in performing arts contexts is in the theatre. That being said, brief mention will be made in the following section of the studio as the primary location for these fusions in their creation and rehearsal phases. While dance in the studio is not just 'a dance' or the 'oeuvre', and the event of a rehearsal practice does not fit the same formal conventions of a performance in the theatre, it is none-the-less dancing the fusion, rather than dancing the vernacular version.

The location of the theatre will be explored in depth. The theatre is by far the main location that the greater public, outside the community of the artists (and administrators) involved in a dance production, encounter and experience dance in performing arts contexts. However there have been a few occasions where the dancing of contemporary and vernacular breaking fusions have been experienced outside of the theatre. These exceptional situations will be explored in a final section.

##### **4.4.1 The studio**

The contemporary dance studio is very similar to those in the breaking and hip hop milieus, and usage may often, in fact, overlap. Ideally the contemporary dance studio is well-lit and has a floor with some rebound, either created by the installation of a thick rubber dance floor or with hardwood floors with some spring. Mirrors are probably less of a necessity in contemporary dance studios than they are in hip hop studios, but that is not a rule. The more open space the better, as the studio will eventually be used as a mock stage, in order for the choreographer to map out how the dance will use space in the performance.

#### 4.4.2 The theatre

Dance choreographers will engage with a theatrical venue through the means of an independent production (rental); a co-presentation or co-production (the sharing of costs and income) or a presentation. The final option is the ideal relationship for an artist to have with a venue, as the main administrative, marketing, and financing of the production will be the responsibility of the presenter, so that the choreographer may consecrate him or herself to artistic responsibilities.

Of all Montreal contemporary dance presenters, only Agora de la Danse and the now-defunct Festival International de Nouvelle Danse have not presented breaking 'fusion' works. Studio 303 presented Victor Quijada in his early experimentations, while Usine C imported the French companies *Käfig* (2001, 2004) and Belgium's *Hush Hush Hush* (2003) from Europe, and Danse Danse presented Rennie Harris's *Pure Movement* from the United States in 2002. Tangente has likely been the most active supporter of this genre, presenting on several occasions *RBDG (Tender Loving Care)* in May and *Hasta La Proxima* in November 2002 and *Metabolism* in March/April 2003); *Solid State* and others<sup>138</sup> under the series heading of 'Urban Dance'. Artistic Director Dena Davida was also a main instigator in the second DNA event in January of 2004.

All of these performance spaces have in common standard theatrical devices of seating and lighting that identify them as what Nahachewsky terms 'presentational': the theatre is a room in which two very separate worlds exist, that of the audience and that of the performance. The performance takes place on the stage within three walls, the 'fourth' wall, being the imaginary one between the audience and the performance. The world of the audience is mundane, utilitarian; it is illuminated before and after the performance in order for the spectators to get in and out of their seats. In a theatre,

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<sup>138</sup> Note especially Alexandra L'Heureux, also trained as a contemporary dance choreographer but who works with (video style) hip hop dance and the most recent hip hop dance 'krumping' with her collaborator, Otis Hopson.

the seating is designed for optimum viewing for all seats; usually they are graded, sometimes on risers. Once the performance begins, the audience ceases, in principle, to exist, and the magical world of the performance takes over. The audience is in darkness and the stage is artistically illuminated. These are what Goffman calls the 'frame' or 'organizational premises' of an activity (1974, p.247). Lights 'off' and 'on' are the "opening and closing temporal brackets and bounding spatial brackets" of the theatrical frame (1974, p.252).

These 'rules' of the theatre are in part what contemporary dance artists have questioned. It is part of the post-modern project and the challenge to 'break down the fourth wall' or that division between performer and audience, a division that prioritizes the dancers and the choreographic vision.

Along that vein, in *Solid State's* earliest pieces, *Pas de Baskettes* (2001) and *Showdown* (2001) and in an earlier piece of Quijada's, *Metabolism* (2003) (both at Tangente) the audience stood on the stage floor while dancers performed dispersed among the crowd. This is one way of attempting to break this hierarchy. In *Slicing Static* Quijada had the theatre reconfigured (altering the conventions of the bounding spatial brackets) so that there were risers on three walls at several different angles. The dancers moved in all areas of the theatre, under seats, above, in the middle of the floor. By occupying the same space as the audience members, Quijada was making the symbolic statement that the dancers and spectators share the same world and exist on the same level.

Ultimately, however, these experiments in design that alter the interior of the theatre do not significantly question the constructs of the theatre. The theatre remains an institution for the presentation of live art, and there is much more involved in that relationship than design. The behind-the-scenes relationship between the dance company and the presenter is intrinsic to the 'where' of dance in a theatre. The ritual leading up to the 'show' includes moments such as the artist submitting a dossier to the artistic director, the artistic director deciding that it is an artistic production of merit, and then finding an appropriate space in the theatre's schedule to program the

artist or group, the signing of a contract, the work involved by both parties to engage in press relations, and finally the technical preparation of lighting design and run-throughs. The closing frame involves the payment and occasionally a closing night gathering and post-mortem meeting to review the production. The framework wherein the audience pays money to passively witness a prepared creation, (funded in part by arts grants) for a set amount of time is retained.

#### 4.4.3 Alternate spaces

It is rare that the 'art world' takes itself out of the theatre to perform in a space normally invested by the breaking community, but such situations have occurred. The second *Out of the Shadows: Movement Phénomène* event (December 2002) took place at the Société des Arts Technologiques (SAT) – a bare-bones concrete shell of a space, an artistic venue often transformed into a nightclub. Event artistic director Kelly Jean Starship brought together various performers including Iroquoian dancer of the Northwestern style Flint Eagle, the trapeze artist Ruby Rowat, and choreographers Victor Quijada and George Stamos, three DJs (DJ Poontz, DJ Bliss, DJ Mana) and the Moment Factory operating projections.

There were dance performances to DJ-created music by Quijada and Stamos and their groups of performers on a stage/pedestal. This was one attempt to bring what is normally in the theatre into the nightclub. The idea was to have audiences dancing as they watched and hence alter the regular passive-watcher/active-performer trope. Starship introduces these concepts in the evening program, explaining how she is:

Examining new ways to utilize the communication potential of dance, inviting the audience on the dance floor as an exchange of energy. This is where vital force enters the community as we [the audience] are swept up into the enthusiasm for dance, becoming inspired to dance ourselves (Starship, 2002).

Her intention was for the event to provide a place for artists of various disciplines to collaborate spontaneously, based on the notion of the 'metaxy' which she defines



as “the space between each other, where ‘in-between’ two understandings ideas intermix becoming something greater than themselves” (Starship, 2002).

This intermixing did occur at this event, in a sense, in the moments between and after the performances, where individuals from different backgrounds and serving separate roles (both performers and spectators), converged on the dance floor in a cypher. The contemporary dance artists had drawn a contemporary dance audience, the DJs and Quijada’s dancers had drawn a b-boy crowd. In between official performances the DJs played music appropriate for a breaking cypher. In the cypher mainly b-boys participated, although Quijada and Eloï danced the *RBDG* elastic version of breaking, and two contemporary dancers, Dominique Porte and Sara Hanley, took turns improvising. They adapted their own contemporary dance and (non-specialized) nightclub dancing vocabulary into an improvisation in the middle of the circle cypher.

Occasionally at other circle cypher events I have seen Quijada and Eloï also dancing their distorted version of breaking. Freezer (Gilbert Baptiste) is another dancer who infiltrates non-breaking technique into his breaking performances. This is in fact, the contemporary technique or contemporary perspective of technique fusions leaving the institution of theatrical dance. It is less visible than the dominant place where it resides, but it is no less important to mention.

#### **4.5 When**

In contrast to the extended time of breaking events, is the contemporary dance performance event, an exemplary ‘contained’ event, adhering to specific temporal parameters. Contemporary dance performances generally fit into the presenting theatre’s season of activities. For regular presenters, this generally lasts from the fall to the spring, with the summers closed. Festivals will generally only take place over the span of a week or two, and may occur in the summer months.

Contemporary dance shows begin at a specific and advertised time – if audience members arrive after this time it is unlikely they will be admitted into the theatre.

Performances often take place in the evening; occasionally there will be a matinee showing. Performances generally last between 45 minutes and two hours. Specific temporal rituals that precede and follow it typically frame the dance: the audience enters, the lights dim, and then the action begins. The reverse occurs at the end of the performance. The event is 'formal', as Goffman indicates "'formality' is a social affair in which there is a great distance in time and character between the outer, informal beginnings and the inner, formal ones, and by implication much protection of the innermost show" (1974, p.264).

Some contemporary choreographers in this decade experiment with altering these formal codes, in order to call into question the strict opposition between the inner and outer activities. For example, in the beginning moments of *Slicing Static*, pre-recorded voices gave absurd directives ('wash hands after using the washroom' and 'look both ways before crossing the street') as the audience seated themselves and before the lights dimmed. This oral performance was obviously part of the 'show'; the phrases were carefully and cleverly built and the reading of them had been rehearsed; making the process of finding seats, usually part of the outer activities, also part of the 'show' or 'game' as Goffman would say.

However there are limits to such innovations – once the audience is seated, latecomers are still not admitted, and once the performance is over, the audience is expected to leave within a reasonable amount of time. The piece is created in order to be viewed from beginning to end, it has a linear logic, which is essential to its structure, which is why latecomers will not be welcome. So as much as choreographers may attempt to modify these rituals, they are not intrinsically

challenged<sup>139</sup>.

## 4.6 Why

In examining the motivations of individuals involved in the performing arts dance event, we must address the question of whose motivations and for what. We can speak of the spectators' motivations for attending a presentation of this work, the presenter's motivations for choosing this work, and of course of the artist's motivations. The artists have chosen breaking as a favoured movement style; they have chosen to pursue a career as a choreographer, and they have chosen to merge these two interests in the creation of artistic work. These motivations will be explored in the following subsections.

### 4.6.1 The choreographers' motivations

Why attempt this treacherous translocation of a vernacular dance to a contemporary dance context? Why contain what is perhaps un-containable? B-girl and choreographer K8 Alsterlund sums up her goals as a choreographer in the following statement:

My goal as a choreographer - I would want to make a show or a piece that has the potential to make a comment about life or to reflect on something about our human nature. I think sometimes you have to make work that has the potential to have an effect on society. And that's the reason [so many] people don't respect our dance – because they don't see it as a form that can affect people and can reflect on life. You know these are the qualities I think we all expect from life, or have the potential to expect from life: social change, the potential for epiphany, having some kind of experience in the viewer that alters them, that alters their view, maybe they'll reflect on later on. ... Which is what I want, what I think artists aspire to, we want to move people<sup>140</sup>.

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<sup>139</sup> Again, there are an increasing number of post-modern choreographers who challenge these codes to a further degree by creating choreographic installations in which spectators are able to come and go as they please, as in an art gallery. Examples of these are Benoît Lachambre's *100 Rencontres* (2003) and Ginette Laurin's *La Résonance du double* (2004).

<sup>140</sup> K8 Alsterlund, interview with author, Montreal, March 18, 2006.

However, not all breakers desire to choreograph contemporary dance pieces. Each of those that have made that leap from freestyle breaking to choreographic creation, have done so for specific reasons.

Quijada's identity as an artist came from his experience at a rather young age with his mentor and dance teacher Rudy Perez, a post-modern choreographer who taught him about artistic movements such as minimalism and surrealism and choreographic concepts that dealt with the manipulation of time, space and energy. At nightclubs he danced with his crew the *Circle Jerks* and a crowd he called 'the hip hop beatniks'. He was intent on pushing the boundaries of the cypher. "I would go into the circle and *not* dance. I'd go in and start fucking around. And everybody was challenging each other. ... I was trying to be an artist<sup>141</sup>." However, it took a long time from those days in the mid-1990s for him to get where he is now, choreographing for his own company.

The remaining directors of *Solid State* have university-level training in contemporary dance with a focus on creation. This experience clearly helped direct the goals of the group towards seeking professional recognition as capital A artists.

Choosing the role of contemporary choreographer is part practical, as it has the potential of extending a dance career beyond the prime dancing years. Creating choreography is also a way to seek accomplishment, as a dance 'piece' is arguably more tangible than are freestyle improvisations. Natasha Jean-Bart, although she ultimately abandoned contemporary choreography, felt that the desire to create a dance piece had to do with wanting to have something concrete to show for her work. She states,

I knew I wanted to make a career out of this, I've always been like this, it is my career. So I decided to invest myself more in *Destins croisés*, because I could see a finality behind it. ... We knew we wanted to do something serious<sup>142</sup>.

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<sup>141</sup> Victor Quijada, interview with author, Montreal, March 24, 2005.

<sup>142</sup> Natasha Jean-Bart, interview with author, Montreal, May 28, 2004.

Although one might think it would be more financially strategic to concentrate one's choreographic energy on the commercial industries of hip hop music for back-up dancers in music videos and on stage, in fact the milieu is small and competitive. Additionally, being a choreographer for the entertainment industry does not bring the same social status as does being a choreographer of contemporary dance.

The motivations of a choreographer to use breaking themes and vocabulary are multiple. First and foremost there is a love for the movement and culture of breaking. The desire to bring breaking into the theatrical setting is based on this love and, in the case of both Quijada and the *Solid State* members, on critique – both of contemporary dance and of breaking.

Often choreographers are unsatisfied with the work that they already see being presented on stage and believe that they can do it better. Choreographers who use breaking movement often see the dance form as being able to provide a vital energy to contemporary dance that otherwise seems to be lacking. *Solid State* presents dance work that is humorous, rhythmic and physical – they are reacting against the dry, intellectual and non-physical trend in some contemporary dance creations. Quijada also is reacting against a lack of vitality in theatrical dance, and sees breaking as a possible cure to this problem. Says Quijada:

I wanted to figure out how I could [choreograph] – because no matter what I saw on stage, no matter how fast Twyla [Tharp]'s choreography was and no matter how risky the partnering was – nothing was as fast, nothing was as dangerous, as risky as what I had seen in the circle [cypher] and been part of in the circle. So I wanted to try to bring that circle to the stage. When I realized how much [creativity and energy] I had in me, and how much I could bring if I find the right tools to bring it. Then it could probably be really exciting<sup>143</sup>.

He also complains bitterly about ballet. During his time dancing for *Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal* he led a double life, going out late to nightclubs and

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<sup>143</sup> Victor Quijada, interview with author, Montreal, March 24, 2005.

working long hard days on ballet. He was having a blast in the clubs, and hating the phoniness of the ballet world, hating being told how to dance, when at night a more real and raw dance was happening. “That was when – if I didn’t bring it together then, it was going to kill me. That’s when I left *Les Grands*<sup>144</sup>.”

Quijada is also critical of breaking, and through his choreographies he is able to identify and deconstruct the unofficial rules of freestyle breaking. These rules are perhaps even less visible than the rules of the theatre, and surprisingly well-entrenched. He states:

There were these rules that we were trying to break in the hip hop circle that we couldn’t break. Attention span was minimum. The music was asking you to do a certain thing. People’s expectations were asking you to do a certain thing... so there was a point at which, fuck – the hip hop shit has a lot of rules too<sup>145</sup>!

In their creations, *Solid State* also takes a critical stance on certain aspects of hip hop culture, such as its machismo. Its critique of contemporary dance tends to remain on a level of stylistic aesthetics, by creating entertaining pieces, in contrast to what they see as the prevalent seriousness of contemporary creation.

#### 4.6.2 The presenters’ motivations

The motivations of the dance presenter are dual. Individuals called ‘Artistic Directors’ run presenting theatres. They belong to the world of contemporary dance, where innovation is encouraged in dance creations. Artistic directors typically want to present cutting-edge art; taking risks on unknown artists that will (hopefully) become recognized later on as having moved the art form forward. At the same time artistic directors have a public to serve and a budget to balance. They cannot take too many risks or they will lose their audience base and go into deficit.

As mentioned earlier, it is the artist director who can determine whether or not an

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<sup>144</sup> Victor Quijada, interview with author, Montreal, March 24, 2005.

<sup>145</sup> Victor Quijada, interview with author, Montreal, March 24, 2005.

artist is successful. While Montreal is relatively rich in dance presenters compared to other Canadian cities, it is also rich in dance artists. Each presenter caters to artists at a certain stage in their career. The competition for spaces in a programming season is tough. Through their choices, artistic directors exert a substantial influence on the character of the contemporary dance milieu. As Tangente Artistic Director and dance academic Dena Davida points out, “it is this small, powerful group of dance presenters whose aesthetic priorities and cultural mandates largely determine the value of contemporary theatrical dances” (1993).

If audiences are waning in contemporary dance, what better way to revitalize attendance by programming choreographies that will appeal to both the contemporary dance public and to a population beyond the dance community, say a youth community or an underground dance community? Hybrid choreographies appeal to multiple communities. Indeed *Solid State* and *RBDG* shows are often performed to full houses. By presenting these choreographers, presenters are supporting work that is both innovative and fiscally safe.

#### **4.6.3 The spectators’ motivations**

The audiences that come to see contemporary choreographies with breaking movement are mixed. Many audience members have an understanding to varying degrees both of the aesthetics of hip hop and of the aesthetics of contemporary dance. There also exist extremes, both those that know absolutely nothing of street dance forms and may feel uncomfortable with some elements, and those that are thoroughly familiar with the street dance world and are new to the theatre setting. Generally the latter make their presence known by being vocal, breaking the unwritten ‘silence’ code of the theatre by interjecting their appreciation when they feel the need, as per Malone’s identification of the quality of ‘dynamism’ in black vernacular dance (1996, p.233).

What was particularly interesting about the audiences during the performances of *Slicing Static* and *Not You* is that they were more vocal in the beginning of the piece,

becoming more mute as the piece went on. In both cases early cheers and whistles following and in recognition of impressive moves gave way to silence. Perhaps their expectation to be able to celebrate the technical feats of breaking was dampened by their growing awareness of the theatrical code of silence until the final applause. Or, as intended by the choreographers, the pieces were increasingly taken not as spectacular feats but as 'serious' art. In contrast, audiences attending *Etch-a-sketch* by *Solid State* (2003), *Futur Proche* by *Destins croisés* (Maison de la culture Frontenac, 2003) and *Corps est graphique* by *Käfig* (Usine C, February 2004) maintained a vocal presence throughout the length of these two pieces, creating an atmosphere that very likely incited the quieter spectators to join in with the crowd vocalization. I find this contrast ironic since the stated goal for both *Slicing Static* and *Not You* was to challenge conventions of the stage, and yet it was the other pieces that more clearly broke the 'fourth wall' and allowed for the participation of the spectators.

#### **4.7 Chapter conclusion**

As one can see through the examination of a contemporary dance event, in particular those that incorporate breaking movement vocabulary, the distinct divisions between the vernacular and performing arts context are more or less adequate. Contemporary dance is clearly a dance style that has sought to distinguish itself from the more classical forms of ballet and modern dance, however it retains many of the same structures and assumptions. While putting into question some of the conventions of the earlier performing arts dance forms, their experimentations can only go so far. The incorporation of breaking movement vocabulary and, with it, black vernacular performance principles and aesthetics has allowed this shift to be explored along a particular vein.

The following chapter will provide a synthesis of these two contexts, as well as elaborating on the structural and social implications of this experiment in dance translocation.



## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

#### 5.1 Introduction: cultural change

Change, especially cultural change, tends to polarize people into two extremes. There are those who embrace change, seeing it as a natural and inevitable evolution of current reality, and those who resist change, fearing the past will be lost to an uncertain and suspect future reality. Performance in changing cultural contexts is variably seen as evolution, adaptation, transformation, modernization (in the positive), or degradation, distortion, appropriation, and commodification (in the negative.)

Elite cultures have long been accused of stealing from popular culture throughout the ages in order to revitalize their own art. 'Cultural appropriation' seemed to have been a key term at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a conflicted issue in an age of political-correctness. Conflict arose specially in cases between indigenous peoples claiming ownership over certain imagery or stories and artists who sought to draw upon these sources, claiming freedom of artistic expression<sup>146</sup>. While in the new millennium we

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<sup>146</sup> In Canada white author Anne Cameron was heavily critiqued by Native authors such as Lenore Keesig-Tobias and Lee Maracle for her book *Daughters of Copper Woman* that claimed to be adaptations of West Coast Aboriginal creation stories. (Scheier, Sheard, Watchel 1990).

seem to have started to come to terms with cultural borrowing and cultural change, issues of power and representation remain. Change is understood to be inevitable, as even indigenous peoples clearly utilize modern technology in the creation and dissemination of their artistic/cultural production. The discourse can be more clearly focused around issues of power asking what forces are directing this change.

In his article "Re-membering Performance", Zarrilli addresses the "inherent contradiction between the dynamic phenomenon of performance and the way we [scholars] often represent it as static" (1987, p.6). The tendency in dance writing, both anthropological and historical, is to fix a given performative form in a particular time and space. Romantic notions have us looking for 'authentic' examples of 'traditional' cultures, un-sullied by Western culture. This search for the exotic 'other' is widespread and somewhat ingrained. It is only in the last decade or so that cultural change is being adequately acknowledged and accounted for in dance texts.

If change is inevitable, the question becomes one of value. What changes do we accept as valid, and what changes do we dismiss or reject? Or, as Roger Copeland asks, "How do we distinguish between a vital new hybrid and the mere 'corruption' of an indigenous tradition" (2001, p.56)? Copeland questions the dichotomy that posits modern cultures as changing and 'traditional' cultures as static. 'Authenticity' he argues, must always be understood in a historical context. However, in this article Copeland does not present a framework for being able to judge if a given fusion choreography is 'exciting' (that's as much as he can muster to describe a desirable fusion) or 'art-by-Cuisinart' as he puts it, the kind of cut-and-paste choreography that borrows from various cultures on a very superficial level (2001, p.60).

Clearly our vocabulary of change reflects an implicit set of values. Zarrilli points out:

How we think about and label 'change' depends upon our point of view, our context, our specific relationship to what it is that is changing or being changed. To discuss change in performance it is necessary to discuss the networks within which performance is nested – the active socio-cultural,

economic, political, artistic and aesthetic networks within which it is produced (1987, p.5).

These ‘networks’ make up the context in which performance is created and enacted. Zarrilli goes on to suggest that certain types of changes can range along a continuum, from the intimate to the ‘operative’, rules and role relationships with little emotional value attached. Some operative changes may be accepted and even desired, others may be accepted with relatively little disturbance, while changes on the intimate level may cause tremendous personal and social upheaval (Zarrilli 1987, p.13).

The differences in the vernacular and performing arts contexts of breaking, has through the previous two chapters, been analyzed with the use of Kealiinohomoku’s dance event categories of who, what, where, when and why. Throughout, four aspects significant to the difference between these contexts (identified in section 1.5 as aesthetic ideology, reproducibility, transmission, and consciousness) have been integrated into these categories. The aesthetic ideology and the reproducibility of a dance in the opposing contextual chapters were addressed in sections 3.3 and 4.3 – the What. The transmission of the dance was addressed in sections 3.2 and 4.2 – the Who. The question of consciousness, likewise, was addressed in sections 3.5 and 4.5 – the Why.

The following sections will first analyze the differences between contexts using Nahachewsky’s participatory/presentational axis (1995, p.1). Next, the question of how this translocation through contexts is executed, leaning heavily on Nahachewsky’s examination of three ‘principles of theatricalization’ or approaches to the creation of stage adaptations of an original. Finally a discussion will be broached on the implication of race and power dynamics through this translocation.

## **5.2 Degrees of presentation**

Zarrilli’s intimate/operative continuum reminds us of Nahachewsky’s presentational/participatory axis introduced in section 1.4.3.2 (1995). This axis can be

applied to the various contexts of breaking in Montreal, with solo practise<sup>147</sup> and the freestyle circle cypher at one end of the spectrum, and contemporary dance fusions at the other. Mid-points would include the organized breaking battle and, slightly further along the axis, freestyle breaking shows. Such an axis in diagram form might look like this:

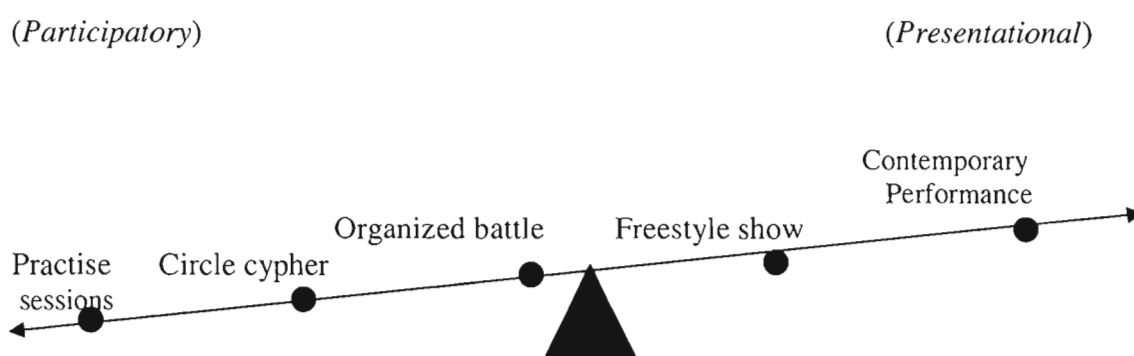


Figure 5.1: Breaking's participatory/presentational axis

Nahachewsky adds another element to this continuum when he observes a difference between 'macroscopic' and 'microscopic' levels of communicative movement elements in dance in its various contexts. Nahachewsky notes that the presentational form of the Ukrainian folkdance 'kolomyika', which is the subject of his study, has an elaborate structure at the macroscopic level (including phrases, formations, etc), whereas the participatory form has a very simple structure with increased complexity on the 'microscopic' level (eye contact, variations in touch,

<sup>147</sup> Other dance activities at this pole might include breaking classes. One could also distinguish between freestyle cyphers in an exclusive group of breakers and those intended for a wider public spectatorship, therefore more presentational.

etc). He relates this to the fact that presentational dances must carry their communicative messages over greater distances than participatory dances (1995, p.1).

In any context both the macroscopic structure and the microscopic interpretive movement are always present to varying degrees. The closer breaking is to the participatory context, the more broad are its structural aspects, and the more room there is for the dancer's interpretation, improvisation or freestyling. The further breaking from a participatory context (closer to the presentational context), the more elaborate and fixed the structure, with less room available for the dancer's free choice in the movement. This opposition can be demonstrated in the figure below:

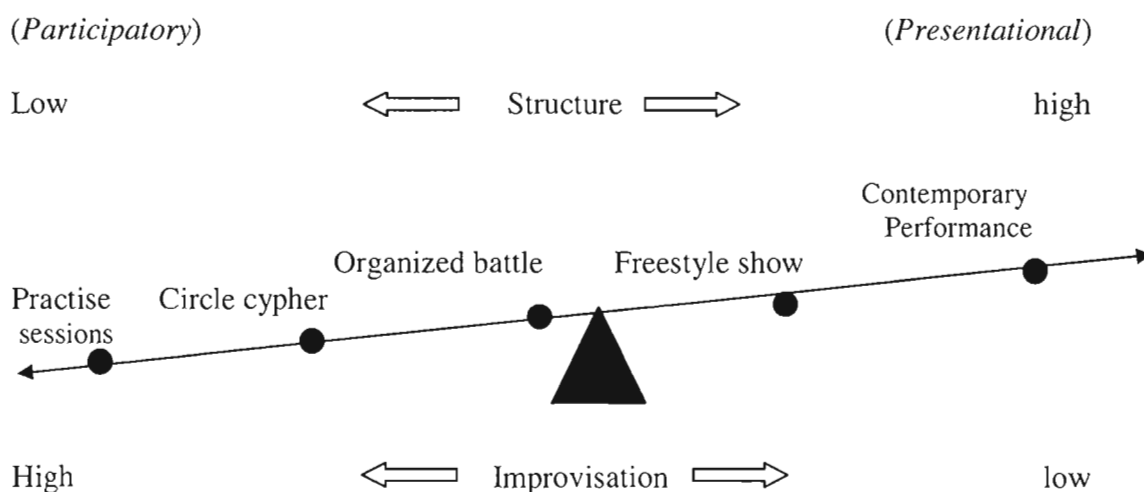


Figure 5.2: breaking's structural/improvisatory axis

### 5.2.1 Circle cypher

The circle cypher is breaking in its most participatory context. Dancing takes place without pre-planning or specific rehearsals. It begins spontaneously, a circle forming within a crowd surrounding the solo breaker, without an imposed orchestration. In the circle cypher, the line separating the performance arena and the spectators is continually being crossed. Dancers emerge from the crowd and enter the

dance space in an unspoken manner negotiated through body language. Claudine Moïse calls the circle 'un-hierarchical':

Because of its symbolism, the circle abolishes the hierarchy of the weakest over the strongest. The dancers enter and leave the circle and even the best among them will be evicted in the permanent circulation, outside all domination. The challenge doesn't exclude the loser, who, drawing from his own strengths and those of the circle, can eventually become first. The roles reverse. If war it is, in the short time span of prowess, it's a war against oneself in the eyes of the onlooker (2004, p.23).

But even in its most participatory context, breaking in the cypher differs from, for example, the Ukrainian folk dance, the 'kolomyika' discussed by Nahachewsky. In Nahachewsky's example the whole community dances, with very few exceptions. Breaking, in contrast, is a very specialized dance, involving intensive practice in order to be performed. The entire hip hop community cannot perform breaking. Breaking is not as participatory as other urban dancing such as at raves where the goal of the dancer is to merge into the crowd, to join the mass in a trance-like union, to forget the spectacle of one's own body, and to give oneself over to sensation alone. Breaking is not a dance of anonymity, it is a dance of spectacle; it is a dance to be seen, of individualism, of display of one's virtuosity. However, even when the circle of onlookers includes non-breakers, the unregulated movement in and out of the circle creates the illusion that anyone on the edge of the circle could participate as a dancer. The crowd invariably participates by cheering, gesticulating, whistling and clapping.

In cyphering the structure is skeletal – dancers take turns moving into the circle for a limited amount of time, choosing from a toolbox of moves broken into segments (uprock, downrock, power moves, freezes). Dancers develop a vocabulary of movement and they are able to draw on that bank in the moment of performance. The context of the cypher asks that the dancer take risks, feeding off of the energy projected by the spectators in order to surpass previous limits. A dialogue may develop between two dancers in which they riff off of each other – responding to a

previous move with a counter move, a better move, an understated move, etc. Therefore the actual composition of the dancer's movement sequences remains relatively spontaneous.

### **5.2.2 Organized battles**

Moving up the participatory-presentational axis, we see less unrestricted participation and more specialization of dancers in the organized breaking battle event. Nothing may have changed in terms of the architecture of the space – battles will occur on the same floor as spectators as often as they will occur on a stage, but the symbolic weight of the line between the spectators and the performing space has increased. During the battle event the line between audience and dancer is guarded. Dancers still emerge from and return to the spectating crowd, but access to the performance area is mediated and controlled by the MC of the event. Only dancers who have committed themselves to participate are summoned by the MC to dance.

However, lines remain fluid in the sense that the performance space is only a patrolled zone during the 'game' or inner activities of the event. The organized battle is inevitably book-ended in time by circle cyphers where access to the performance area is again not guarded. The spectators during both the 'game' and 'spectacle' (surrounding activities) are still very much active, physically and vocally, and this active spectator-participation is still intrinsic to the event.

In battling contexts the structure is still skeletal, with improvisation forming the bulk of the movement sequencing. In addition to the uprocks/downrocks/power moves structure, there is the structure imposed by the competition: competitors taking a regulated and limited number of turns for a limited length of time. Dancers, especially in group battles, will draw to a greater degree upon more pre-rehearsed set 'routines' in organized battles. But the spontaneous response to the opponent, taking what has been presented to you in movement and using it in a reply is still present. For example, a dancer beginning a competitive turn may sometimes begin before the previous dancer is finished, using more gestural moves of the uprocks directed

aggressively at an opponent in order to back a competitor out of the performance space. In this way the rules of the structure are allowed to bend somewhat.

### **5.2.3 Freestyle and showcase shows**

In freestyle and showcase performances dancer-participation is not open. Participation is selective, but it may not even fall along crew lines. The performing group is selected to dance at a given event, often by someone from outside the breaking community. Choices may therefore be artistic or political rather than collective or anarchic.

Freestyle and showcase performances will most often take place on a stage, as part of a cultural festival and sharing the stage with other, mostly musical acts or as a corporate engagement. Often the stage will be set up outdoors, with the audience standing. If the audience is largely coming from hip hop or other African diasporic communities, spectator-participation is still very common. If, on the other hand, the audience is made up largely of people not familiar with Africanist aesthetics and appropriate audience responses, the participation of the audience will be minimal and the performance will likely suffer, as the freestyle routines are often constructed in anticipation of vocal responses at peak moments.

### **5.2.4 Contemporary dance fusion performances**

Likewise, in contemporary dance performances, dancer-participation is even more exclusively chosen, and active spectator-participation is not encouraged. Any live performance requires the attentive participation of an audience – an audience must at minimum be physically present. In most contemporary dance presentations, spectators have often paid a fee, therefore this extreme presentational dancing still involves a minimal degree of participation from the audience.

However the gulf between the dancers and the spectators is definitive, marked off by the edge of the stage and an imaginary orchestra pit, operating like a symbolic moat protecting the fortress of the performance area. The gaze of the audience is



directed towards the performance through staging devices: most of the time lighting that illuminates the dancers but not the audience, and architecture (graded seating) that aims to maximize visibility. Spectators are 'safe' in their seats and in darkness. Normally, the environment of the contemporary dance event asks that the spectator be invisible, a passive receptor. Spectators and performers may come into the theatre building from the same street, as the axiom has it, but they certainly enter the inner hall through different doors, therefore marking their distinct roles<sup>148</sup>.

Again, the structure or macroscopic level of communicative movement elements is elaborate, and personal choice or improvisation is minimal. Following Nahachewsky's observations on the loss of microscopic movement in this distribution along the presentational/participatory axis, DeFrantz observes that, "if conversation occurs between music and its dancers, and between dancers, the subtleties of that conversation are missed in the separation of participant and observer" (2004, p.68). However, particularly in the work of Quijada, subtlety of movement is highlighted. Because the sequences he creates are often solos or duets, attention is given to the play between the dancer and the music and between the dancers. It is a structure that has been finely tuned to operate on a microscopic level. *Solid State's* work seems to be moving towards this direction as they refine their choreographic voice.

### **5.3 Techniques of translocation**

#### **5.3.1 Three principles of theatricalization**

On a pragmatic level, in his article "Strategies for Theatricalizing Folk Dances" Andriy Nahachewsky examines Ukrainian dance theorist Kim Vasylenko's three 'principles of theatricalization' (2000). These are best understood as three approaches to the staging of originally participatory dances. These approaches move in degrees from the least amount of tinkering of the original form to the greatest amount of modification.

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<sup>148</sup> Several contemporary dancers question these constructs in their work.

A first principle choreography would make only minimal necessary changes in order to put a participatory dance onto a stage. For example circles will be opened towards the audience, and rather than continuous repetition of one figure or sequence, one figure will be developed into interesting variations. The primary goal is “preservation of the original form” (Nahachewsky 2000, p.233). The performance is framed as ‘authentic’, and the audience is encouraged to believe that they are witnessing a faithful reproduction of an original participatory dance, that the only thing that has been changed is the setting.

In a second principle choreography the alterations made will be more stylistic, consciously constructed to please a large audience. In this principle, movement is moulded to capitalize on its spectacular aspects, favouring large movement such as jumps borrowed from ballet, with a polished, athletic quality. Rather than using repetition, a mechanism appropriate to the extended event, the second principle composition will use the Western narrative device that is “conceived in a linear framework, starting with an introduction, building in energy (momentum, difficulty, tempo, etc.) to a climax, then concluding rather quickly” (Nahachewsky 2000, p.229). Costumes will be designed with greater uniformity and to allow for optimal display of this more athletic movement.

In the third approach to the theatricalization or staging of folk dances, the source participatory dance is only one of many influences involved in the creation of the choreography. There is no pretence that this piece is a dance revival or reconstruction, rather it is an original creation. It is ‘art’ signed by the author, the choreographer. Promotion surrounding the dance event in which the piece is performed might none-the-less lean heavily on the ‘ethnic’ character of the choreographer, appealing to the audience’s desire to see something ‘exotic’ or at least different from the usual fare (Nahachewsky 2000, p.229).

### 5.3.2 Theatricalization principles in breaking

In the application of these principles of theatricalization or approaches to staging participatory dances to the dance form of breaking across its many possible contexts, one could position the circle cypher as the original participatory dance, organized battles as 'first principle' choreographies, freestyle shows as 'second principle' choreographies and contemporary dance fusions as 'third principle' choreographies.

The organized battle, as argued previously, is only one step removed from the circle cypher. It showcases freestyle or improvised breaking, with only minimal adjustments and limitations (participants, timing, etc.) in order to structure the experience for both the participants and the spectators. Freestyle performances are subject to the kind of choreographic shaping described in the second principle or approach. Freestyle performances are generally very short, and therefore must capitalize on compositional devices that will make an immediate visual impact and provoke an audience response. Moves will be daring, athletic and spectacular. This type of theatricalization is probably most influenced by dominant Western elite dance traditions. Nahachewsky notes that:

The changes which take place in the physical form of the dances in the process of theatricalization are not random, but tend strongly to reflect the aesthetics of spectacular proscenium theatre dance, and ballet in particular. The conventions of this tradition include frontalness, monumentality, unison, textural density, amplification of movement, linearity in composition, and virtuosity (2000, p.233).

The influence of ballet internationally is not to be overlooked, even in the context of the counter-culture of hip hop and breaking. This effect is especially amplified when the audience is non-initiated in Africanist and hip hop aesthetics. As Drewal points out, spectators will not be able to understand the subtleties of a dialogue based on a specific vocabulary they do not share, and will instead cling to the spectacular nature of the movement (2003, p.129). Freestyle dancers will seek very naturally to

prioritize spectacular movement over more subtle investigations of rhythmic play in freestyle shows.

An outsider audience might also be entranced by the aggressive nature of the dance, so different from the gentle femininity of ballet and most contemporary dance. Aggressive movement will give the spectator a feeling of danger, despite being safe in their seats. This referencing of the ghetto is also spectacular, despite it being so strongly mediated by the distancing affect of the stage.

This second principle of theatricalization is the type of strategy most often used by the State folk dance ensembles explored by Anthony Shay. He elaborates on the pretence of these choreographies to represent not only an 'authentic' version of the folk culture from which they draw their inspiration, but also of the entire culture or nation:

The value of utilizing folk dance for the representation of an entire nation emerges from the common public view that these dances originate in some primordial source of the nation's purest values and that folk dances, music and costumes are timeless and date from some prehistoric period (1996, p.35).

Representation of this kind provides the opportunity for cultural pride, especially in situations where the culture expressed is not the dominant culture. One can see that presentations of freestyle breaking shows at cultural events are an expression of identity, representing the 'Hip Hop Nation' in a positive environment, combating perceptions relating rap and hip hop to gangsterism.

In contrast, groups such as Victor Quijada's *RBDG* and *Solid State* operate from a critical perspective, seeking to inscribe themselves between several dominant realities. This positions them as third principle choreographies. Clearly contemporary dance fusion artists do not want to replicate the elitist art of ballet and the pretensions of creating spectacular movement without any deeper meaning. Romanticized representations of hip hop culture are seen by them as didactic simplifications. These artists also reject the commodification of hip hop, the easy 'eye candy' of the entertainment and music video industry which uses fast movement synchronized to

pulsating beats emphasizing tits, ass and abs. Contemporary dance is another pathway through representation which allows it to reference breaking and the rebellious, celebratory youth culture of hip hop, while still remaining thoughtful and purposeful agents of positive cultural change.

### 5.3.3 Third principle choreographies: *RBDG* and *Solid State*

According to Nahachewsky, in all three principles or approaches to the staging of participatory dances, the goal is to represent the essential nature of the dances be it through maintaining the form, costumes, etc (first approach); maintaining the form and highlighting spectacular elements (second approach) or eschewing form altogether as a means to access the dance's 'spirit' (third approach).

The concept of preservation or representation of the 'essential spirit' of the dance coming from Nahachewsky's third principle of theatricalization applies to both *RBDG* and *Solid State*. Their desire is clearly not to attempt to replicate the form of the dance on stage. Their goal is not to reproduce a breaking cypher within the four walls of a theatre, they acknowledge that such a transfer alters essential characteristics of the dance. In the following passage Quijada grapples with what is lost when any improvised dance is put on stage:

You have really traditional Ukrainian dances being presented and real traditional Mexican folk dances being presented on stage - which try to show what it was originally, but it's not. You lose [something]. I['ve] talked to a lot of people that say, 'we want to do what's happening on the street, in the circle, on stage', and I'm like 'you can't!' You can not... without losing the essence of what was happening in the circle. That's the magic of it. With any improvised thing. It's the magic, that's what you're trying to present on stage and that's what is lost when trying to present it on stage<sup>149</sup>.

Instead of reproduction, Quijada's quest is to try to express the spirit or magic of the cypher in his choreographic creations. In his view, the excitement and awe he feels in the cypher is the essence of breaking. He seeks for ways to express this

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<sup>149</sup> Victor Quijada, interview with author, Montreal, March 24, 2005.

essence without falling into the trap of reproduction. This mission shapes his various pieces as he experiments with new ways to reach this illusive goal.

Likewise *Solid State* recognizes its role as a transmitter of an idea or spirit, rather than a replication of the actual thing. They shape their work to convey, particularly to young women, an empowering experience. Fancello states:

It's stuff that is very, very tricky. We think a lot about what is it, in the actual break dance form that inspires us, that we see can be transposed onto stage. Because of course it's going to be changed, of course it's going to be completely different than breaking, and the moment we do take it onto stage it's going to be something else even if you do exactly what you do in a circle, in a cypher, it's something totally else. ...

And then trying to figure out what it all means. And also playing with pop culture and playing with what is the essence, the beauty of break dance<sup>150</sup>.

We see in both of these examples that the choreographers are working through various attempts to convey to a static public an element that they hold very dear, something that has touched them deeply – the spontaneity and vitality of breaking.

Despite the fact that freestyle choreographies are clearly second principle theatricalizations in their explicit use of techniques such as frontality, spectacularity and their appeal to romantic notions of authenticity, it is the contemporary dance fusions that create the most consternation and critique in breaking circles, while freestyle choreographies are virtually unquestioned. Is it possible to maintain a formal integrity while avoiding the reductive spectacularization of second principle or freestyle choreographies?

#### **5.4 Socio-political dimension: race and power**

The situation complexifies when issues of race and power come into play. Breaking is a dance that originates from an underprivileged class of people. Relative to inner-city black youth, contemporary dance is a privileged place traditionally

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<sup>150</sup> Claudia Fancello, interview with author, Montreal, November 23, 2004.

dominated by Euro-Canadians, with institutional support through access to funding and academic validation. As mentioned earlier, if change is inevitable, the question becomes that of who controls this change? Are the dance's origins, its underground status and vigorous vitality evident through the process of translocation? DeFrantz asks, "does the commodification of the form for an audience of cultural outsiders somehow unmark break dancing as an invention of the black diaspora and a manifestation of body talking" (2004, p.75)?

#### **5.4.1 Commodification and mis-representation**

In his essay on improvisation in African American vernacular dance Jonathan David Jackson argues against contextual change in dance. Jackson's criticisms are two-fold: a change in context tends to mask the cultural history of the dance and it devalues the dance. He warns that:

The commodification and distortion of black vernacular dancing for mainstream white Euro-American consumption is as enduring as the traditions themselves. The primary effect of such cultural appropriation is the denial of the dancing's traditional cultural context and a misnaming of the ways in which the dancing evolves by the people who originate the traditions. Other effects include the devaluation of the dancing as "low-culture" (or as fads) and the concomitant rejection of rich cultural meaning and aesthetic intelligence (2001, p.41-42).

Jackson is speaking to the long tradition of white American appropriation and commercialization of black expressive arts - the same process in effect which transmutes all its black performance into 'entertainment' rather than as art. This process can be seen most clearly in turn of the century minstrelsy, where white performers capitalized on their mockeries of black artistry. Through the jazz era Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly became movie stars with their stylized tap dancing, while only a tiny portion of the mass of black dancing talent managed to gain any recognition or financial security. Katherine Dunham, Pearl Primus and Asadata Dafora struggled for their dance creations to be accepted as art through the 1940s and

1950s. This understanding of the cultural history of black dance is, according to Jackson, denied in its translocation.

In his article Jackson gives recognition to what he calls African American vernacular dance's 'aesthetic intelligence', implicitly evident in its originating socio-cultural context to cultural insiders. His articulation of the complex creative processes that constitute black vernacular improvisation is explored, evidently in order to validate them in the eyes of dance academics, who by and large do not already have this implicit understanding. Jackson, however, does not distinguish between appropriations of black vernacular traditions into the commercial realm, and contemporary theatrical alterations by dance artists.

Indeed, articulation and validation in the realm of academics in our cultural and social context is a necessary task. It is not hard to prove that breaking has suffered from a 'mis-naming' or mis-representation in standard academic texts<sup>151</sup>. One only needs to survey the dance dictionaries and encyclopaedias that lump all Old School hip hop dances under the term 'break-dance' without giving accurate definitions. Other Old School hip hop dance forms such as locking and popping, not to mention the New School dances of New Jack Swing and house dancing are completely ignored. One such example is in the Canadian publication *Dictionary of Dance: Words, terms and phrases*, which defines 'break-dance' as, "an energetic style of street-dancing, developed in the United States by urban youth" (1996, p.20). Out of a 175-page book, with specific ballet terms such as 'demi-plié' and five different variations on the concept 'fouetté', this brief sentence is the sole reference to the many dances of hip hop culture and their rich vocabulary of movement terms for each of the dances.

Similarly, the *International Encyclopedia of Dance*, edited by Selma Jeanne Cohen, includes an article on 'break dancing', written by Sally Banes. While Banes

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<sup>151</sup> See section 1.4.1 Breaking and Hip hop culture of the Literature Survey in chapter one.



may have had a certain authority on breaking in the 1980s, by the end of the 1990s she had clearly moved on to other interests, and as a result her article has 'break dance' dying out by the early 1990s, when in fact that was the moment of its rebirth, so that by the time the article was published in 1998, it had become a vital, although still underground, phenomenon (Osumare 2001, 2002, Roy 1995). She does not name any of the originators of the dance, effectively rendering them invisible – without their names recorded, it is as if they do not exist.

Examples of the mis-representation of breaking are also local, as in the local press. K8 Alsterlund (b-girl Lynx) critiques an article written by a dance critic whose writing about the underground breaking community was rife with biased and unfounded assumptions. As a b-girl, Alsterlund was deeply offended by this writer's insinuations and lack of research. She states:

It really pisses me off that a lot of people that write about our culture or talk about our culture are not people who participate in our culture. [They] don't take the time to invest in educating themselves on what they are actually reporting on<sup>152</sup>.

#### **5.4.2 Institutional recognition and patronage**

In some ways the underground counter-culture of breaking is a world onto its own, with its own set of values and priorities distancing it from outside judgement. In other ways such institutional misunderstanding can affect the community. A negative public and institutional perception helps to close doors for breakers to possibilities such as arts funding and stable teaching opportunities in schools.

Since the 1950s, with the formation of the Canada Council for the Arts, the state subsidizes the Fine arts, indicating that our society considers art to be a collective need. Through this system, tangible privileges are accorded to them. These are the benefits of being considered 'high art'. As Sparshott puts it:

Ballet has fairly regularly been allowed such a place [of esteem], and has been joined, especially in America, by 'Modern and Post-Modern' dance, an

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<sup>152</sup> K8 Alsterlund, interview with author, Montreal, March 18, 2006.

amorphous tradition marked out precisely by the aspiration to replace ballet as high art. The implication is that these arts enhance life in a way that warrants large expenditure of public energy and public funds. A branch of dance has clearly attained the status of high art if it gets a special subvention from the public purse... (Sparshott, 1995, p.39).

Historically, the goal of this Council is to develop a body of uniquely Canadian art, differentiated from the previously dominant British and American influences<sup>153</sup>. The Canada Council is based on the tenants of arms-length and peer-assessment, in other words the definition of what is art is not answerable directly to politicians or bureaucrats. Artists define what is art and who are artists.

Canadian Sociologist Peter Li argues that Canada's policy towards Occidental arts and minority arts and cultures have produced two different support structures for enhancing artistic development in Canada, leading to unequal art worlds (1994, p.365-366). He states:

The formal art world of Canada and the multicultural circle of visible minorities are distinguishable by differences in social organization, rules of operation, standards of evaluation, source of patronage, and forum of communication; as well, their products differ in form and content and carry unequal aesthetic and market value. The Government's patronizing policy towards minorities' art and culture and the institutionalization of these two separate art worlds stifle the artistic creativity and aesthetic development of visible minorities. Canada's art and multicultural policies reflect and reinforce a cultural hegemony that upholds the dominance of Occidental values and culture (1994, p.366).

Indeed those breakers that do manage to counter the amorphous non-hierarchy inherent in vernacular cultures in order to conform and commit to a particular goal find themselves more likely to find financial and institutional support in the social services sector. Natasha Jean-Bart (b-girl Tash) once said, "We are not babysitters.

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<sup>153</sup> Donna Balkan (Senior Communications Manager at the Canada Council), un-transcribed interview with author, Ottawa, April 11<sup>th</sup>, 2004. For more information on the Canada Council for the Arts, see their website: [www.canadacouncil.ca](http://www.canadacouncil.ca).

We aren't going to stay in the community centres our whole lives<sup>154</sup>," referring to the lack of recognition for street dances on the part of institutions such as the arts funding agencies. She would clearly like to see street dancers being treated equally to those training in contemporary dance, to consider that they have the same or parallel opportunities, with financial as well as societal rewards. The exclusion of Montreal's founding and/or star breakers from the opportunities available in the performing arts context such as theatrical engagements and arts funding has sparked criticism from other vernacular breakers. B-boy David Dundas (aka DKC – *Flow Rock* and *Legz* crews) reveals his irritation over this in the following statement:

It's not normal that a group like [*Solid State*] gets the funding for hip hop or urban dance when to me, that's not what they study. They don't know [how to break] from the street, they know [how to break] from the book, from what they learned. And [yet], they get all the money... In Montreal they are the group that gets all the funding, they are the group that has the most [institutional] respect in breaking...<sup>155</sup>

Since 1994 the Canada Council for the Arts has evolved to incorporate a more inclusive perspective on artistic cultures. The issue axes somewhat around the question of what the definition of a 'professional' artist is. Professionalism doesn't signify that the artist earns their living from their art, as the arts councils purport to support artists in the early stages of their careers. If that were the case, artists such as breakers making a living in the commercial entertainment sector would be eligible. The purpose of arts funding is not to subsidize art that works perfectly well in a capitalist system. Professionalism, rather, is determined by training. According to Senior Communications Manager Donna Balkan, in the past admissible training came from institutions, and the dance forms that had institutions were ballet and modern dance. However, the concept of training has enlarged over the past ten years to be

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<sup>154</sup> Natasha Jean-Bart, un-transcribed interview with author, Montreal, September 2002.

<sup>155</sup> David Dundas, interview with author, Montreal, January 29, 2006.

inclusive of dance forms and cultures not part of Western institutional traditions.

Balkan states:

We are not really looking at accreditation. We talk about formal training or equivalent. If you take a look at the Aboriginal cultures, we are talking about traditions that are passed down from generation to generation. It is recognized that there are equivalent ways to, as they say in French, to *former* yourself, on the way to becoming a professional artist. It's a very, very important recognition, because at one time there was much too much emphasis on accreditation<sup>156</sup>.

This shift in perspectives also takes its time in permeating underground and other aboveground sectors. Breakers themselves may not find much satisfaction or purpose in pressuring institutions such as the Conseil des arts et des lettres de Québec and support structures such as the Regroupement de la danse or the Dancer's Transition Resource Centre to recognize them as dance artists. To someone unfamiliar with the language and codes of such organizations, their application process would be very daunting. The institutions themselves might themselves do more to reach out to other dance communities and broaden their vision, however funding bodies in particular struggle to meet the current level of requests for support. To accept a broader vision of fundable artists and art projects would mean removing money from artists and institutions that have become dependent on them. It is not a decision to take lightly.

Dance companies such as *Solid State* and *RBDG*, through their mixed nature, play an important role in broadening these definitions. Fancello states that when *Solid State* applied to the Canada Council for the Arts to support the creation of *Etch-a-sketch*, they listed themselves under the heading 'other - urban dance'. The first company to receive money under that heading; this is now one of the official genres in the appendix<sup>157</sup>.

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<sup>156</sup> Donna Balkan, un-transcribed interview with author, Ottawa, April 11<sup>th</sup>, 2004.

<sup>157</sup> Claudia Fancelle, personal communication (email), August 21, 2007.

## 5.5 Chapter conclusion

Contemporary artists, no matter how much their status is descended from historical notions of the elite culture of the ruling class in our current capitalist society, do not carry much economic weight. Their basic purpose is not to uphold class divisions or profit monetarily, but to be critically artistic.

In some ways, *RBDG* choreographer Victor Quijada and the *Solid State* collective members, with their hybrid identities, can act as bridges between two worlds. Funders, presenters, and arts journalists are given a window into a world through theatre representations of breaking they would otherwise probably not venture near. *Solid State* member Dana Schnitzer states:

It's a kind of validation – but I don't mean validation in the sense that you elevate it to a European cultural form, which is now GREAT. Whereas before in the circle on the floor in the Bronx it wasn't GREAT, it was fabulous then too. But it definitely allows you to share it. It allows breaking to influence the contemporary art world. That's a positive, I think, for the street world to influence the European world<sup>158</sup>.

Like Jackson's translocation of black vernacular dancing from its originating socio-cultural context to an academic context, could not contemporary dance fusions be a similar borrowing? If Jackson wishes for public validation of black vernacular dancing, academia travels in rather limited circles and operates on a limited cerebral level. Live performance offers the possibility of the somatic understanding and appreciation of black dance aesthetics, without the reductive eye-candy effect of the music video. However, while the 'institution' is busy paying attention to the breaking 'artists' they are still ignoring the street dancers. Does the definition of contemporary dance or of art appropriate for funding need to change? Should we remove the word 'breaking' in the context of Quijada and *Solid State's* work? Do breaker 'traditionalists' such as Dundas need to accept that the form must change if it is to benefit from the privileges of being considered contemporary art?

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<sup>158</sup> Dana Schnitzer, interview with author, Montreal, November 13, 2004.

Jackson dismisses consideration of vernacular dances beyond their 'original context' as outside the scope of his study. But the reality is that as much as he may resist these tendencies, the theatricalization of vernacular dance happens. We can't legislate culture, and even less art. Artists such as Quijada and *Solid State* members will strive to create fusions – we can only hope that they do so with a critical eye, conscious of the possible stereotypes and pitfalls of such an activity. We can trust too that their audiences will accompany them on this journey, engaging them in a critical discourse to steer them on a thoughtful path.

But this questioning must be continuous. Choreographic works must be seen as a process rather than as complete finished ends. No one artist has figured out a formula of how to create work perfectly. Each new creation can be seen an exploration, rather than a definitive answer. This kind of thinking runs counter to the standard reception of artwork. The artist's role is to experiment, to explore, to take stabs toward reaching their artistic goals, not to produce easily digestible, pat answers to their questioning. What allows them to continue this quest is that their pieces do touch audiences, audiences who are willing to go on a journey with them, and will return for subsequent chapters of that journey. This is as much as we can ask.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

The research and writing of this master's thesis has been a journey in itself. Through this exercise, I have had the honour of learning and exploring, of developing concepts and bridging between divergent sources of information in order to create a comprehensive whole. The writing process itself has challenged me to organize my ideas, the very process of articulation being necessary to the intellectual evolution of my thought. Very clearly, much more could be said on the subject, but for now this document is the culmination of roughly five years of investigation into the translocation of a vernacular dance to the performing arts context.

The questions that remain are numerous, and will stimulate me for years to come. In particular the question of validation as a concept remains to be looked at critically. Institutional recognition of an otherwise underground dance tradition reinforces the power and importance of that institution. Why does breaking need institutional understanding? How does institutional validation affect (positively or negatively) the underground dance culture? After all, producing a vernacular dance in the context of the establishment (or discussing it in an academic paper such as this) may validate the dance in the eyes of the establishment, but what use is that for the non-establishment? This questioning is equally valid when turned towards this study.

Although I might have hoped that this work would be of benefit to the breaking community in Montreal or elsewhere, realistically it would have to take another form in order to be accessible to those individuals. The importance of this act, of handing over the research to the community under study, cannot be underestimated. It is

through their critique that the work might become whole. This would be a future project, to present portions of this research to the breaking community through alternate forms such as on-line forums, at the *Hip Hop Symposium*, or, more ambitiously, by coordinating a book publishing project, primarily of breakers speaking in their own words, through interviews and essays. A challenge in each of these cases will be to avoid the trap of positioning the contemporary dance fusion artists as the inevitable evolutionary destiny of the form. In fact the point would be to represent the culture as it is in all of its facets, all being equally valid.

In reality this research is more appropriately directed towards the institutional establishment of contemporary dance. It is for them that these thoughts are directed, as a call, in part, to re-evaluate dualist thinking which positions vernacular dance traditions as 'low' art and guards 'high' art as a prestigious club with exclusionary entrance regulations. Although many individuals in the contemporary dance community do not intend to be exclusionary, our thinking and ability to communicate is shaped by our limiting vocabulary. The task still remains to imagine creatively a space wherein vernacular breaking is given proper recognition within arts institutions.

In fact, such changes are already slowly occurring. In June 2007, the Guelph Contemporary Dance Festival presented the *Canadian Floor Masters*, the Ottawa-based breaking crew in April/May 2007 and the *Solid State Breakdance Collective* in June. The same month the Canada Dance Festival, under the artistic direction of Brian Webb, hosted an event called *Hip Hop 360* in Ottawa, highlighting only one contemporary dance fusion company, *Rubberbandance Group*, among several other activities such as forums and workshop geared specifically towards the needs of the breaking community. These examples show that presenters are beginning to open their vision to another kind of 'contemporary', and another way of interacting with a public. It is recognizing that the public is not simply a group of passive theatregoers, but that many in society are dancers in their own right.

Dance artists often complain regarding their low status among the Fine and performing arts. The blame for poor attendance in dance theatres is often placed on



the lack of dance in society. In fact there is a lot of dance occurring in our society – it just doesn't always occur in the theatres. It takes place in nightclubs, at Salsa bars, at Milangas where people gather to tango, in parks at folk dance gatherings, at barn dances, in community centres, in school gyms. The 'problem', if there is one, is the large chasm in our society between dance as a social practice and dance as an artwork practice. Dance on the contemporary dance stage generally draws from the rarefied dance vocabulary of the professional dance studio, rarely relating to the bodily pleasure of the average spectator, experienced while they are dancing their chosen non-institutionalized dance movement.

*Rubberbandance Group* and the *Solid State Breakdance Collective* represent only a few of the many contemporary dance choreographers who have recognized the immense potential of a vernacular dance form to communicate to an audience. In doing so they challenge, in their own ways and perhaps to a limited degree, but they challenge none-the-less, the divisions between high and low art, presentational and participatory dance, contained and extended events. They have chosen the dance of breaking to fuse with the structures of contemporary dance because their love for the dance is an inextricable part of them, and they would not be whole without it. They would not be complete if they did not represent their entire hybrid identities in the work that they do.

I must resign myself to the fact that re-reading source material and engaging in new conversations with informants inevitably leads to new revelations, sparking new questions and possibilities for research. This is but a moment in time – the research and editing process must end somewhere. It ended here. For now.

APPENDIX A  
ESSAY BY AUTHOR, 2006

## Urban Youth Street Dances Go to the Movies and Become 'Breakdancing'

Lys Stevens

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This paper will be an exploration of the role that film depictions of dance in hip hop culture played in the global spread of hip hop. More specifically it will be an examination of how the transmission of this dance traveled from the screen to the body to create 'lived' subcultures in outposts far away from hip hop's birthplace in the Bronx. I started questioning this transmission during research for my master's thesis on 'breaking' in Montreal. The role of dance in hip hop culture, especially in popular and academic discourse is often misrepresented and under-acknowledged. I will be focusing on mainstream teen dance films from the early 80s, and only making brief mention of more recent films portraying hip hop dances.

When the idea for this paper first arose, my plan was to undertake a critique of those films mentioned above, with the intention of revealing how commercial interests had exploited African American vernacular dance or what is commonly called 'street dances' – the popular dances of black America. But through my interviews with early breakers in Montreal, those who were active in the mid-80s, it became clear that these films played an essential role in the export of breaking and hip hop expressive culture, what is referred to as the 'four elements' of hip hop culture: the DJ or turntablism; the poetry of the MC or rap lyrics; the graffiti; and of course the dance, as well as other expressive aspects such as clothing and the use of language.<sup>119</sup> I realized that these films were primary in the global spread of what Halifu Osumare calls transnational hip hop's 'intercultural body' (2002). For example a breaker from Montreal is able to travel to Germany and corporeally interact with a Korean breaker, speaking the same dance language, but perhaps not the same verbal language. This second-generational appropriation of culture leads me to question the meaning of 'authenticity' in the context of this dance and the sacredness of tradition, even so short a tradition as breaking.

I am suggesting that four teen dance films of the early 1980s are indivisible from this process of cultural transmission. Probably the most popular of these films is 'Flashdance', released in 1983, in which there are brief minutes of street dance inserted into a dance narrative involving mainly other forms of dance. I include as well three slightly less well known films, all released in 1984, in which street dance played a larger role: 'Beat Street' filmed in New York City and produced by Harry Belafonte, 'Breakin' I', and close on its heels its sequel 'Breakin' II: Electric

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<sup>119</sup> See Friedland's elaboration on these expressive elements, "All these interrelated communicative and expressive systems – movement, sound, visual arts, language, and attitude – are explored by young African-Americans in the pursuit of 'style.' Style is the means by which an individual progresses in the spiritual quest for aesthetic communication. The social prestige of being recognized as an artist in the culture, and in the community, can be achieved only through the cultivation of 'style.'" (Friedland, 1995: 138-139)

Boogaloo', both filmed in California – closer to Hollywood, but further away from the birthplace of breaking in the Bronx.<sup>120</sup> These films may not be accurate or even fair portrayals of dance in hip hop culture, but what they did do was to create a window of opportunity. I argue that they played a vital role in the creation of vernacular 'lived' dance cultures in pockets, at least initially among marginalized youth, around the world. After its meteoric rise in popularity in the early 80s and subsequent crash-and-burn disappearance from the public eye, breaking has, in particular since the early 1990s, slowly grown in popularity to the point that Hollywood is once again taking notice. Recent films depicting hip hop dancing are 'Save the Last Dance' (2001); 'Honey' (2003) and 'You Got Served' (2004).

First I would like to clarify some misconceptions about the dances I will be referring to and speak a bit about the origins of 'breaking' and 'breakdance' in particular; then I will briefly raise some questions about the problematic nature of these films; and finally I will discuss this issue of transmission of the dance via a celluloid form such as film to the Montreal street dance scene of the 1980s.

### 1. Distinguishing between hip hop dances

Within hip hop culture there exists a spectrum of dances, from breaking, locking and popping (these three are referred to as 'Old School' dance forms) to 'New School' dances such as the New Jack Swing, the more generic video style hip hop, and more recent dances such as Clowning and Krumping popularized in certain music videos<sup>121</sup> and through the documentary film 'Rize' (2005).

Breaking or b-boying is distinguished by its vertically-danced uprock, the fast leg movement of its downrock or footwork performed with the body hovering just above the ground, and the gravity-defeating power moves such as the spins, windmills and freezes. Breaking in its vernacular context is danced as a competitive 'freestyle' dance, as solo improvisations in the 'cypher', the dance space created within a circle of onlookers. Breaking is often confused with the other 'Old School' dances – West Coast funk dances, namely locking and what is now commonly called popping, both drawing on earlier popular dances such as the Funky Chicken and the Robot. Locking is distinguished by wrist rolls, Uncle Sam points and puppet-like movement. Popping is technically quick muscular contractions, but it also encompasses movement styles such as the wave, animation, ticking and others.

Breaking began as an entirely separate dance, on the east side of the continent, at about the same time as the funk dances. It evolved into a stable form around the early 1970s in the post-gang era

<sup>120</sup> Although this paper does not examine them, other early media representations of breaking include the independent film *Wild Style* (1982), and the documentary film *Style Wars* (1983). Because these films were not mainstream films their impact, especially outside of New York, was significantly less, however they are now regarded as more authentic representations of the early breaking scene and therefore used as a reference.

<sup>121</sup> See for example Missy Elliott's *I'm Really Hot*, Madonna's *Hung Up* and *Sorry*, the Black Eyed Peas's *Hey Mama* music videos and the 2005 film *Be Cool*.

of the economically depressed and socially-forgotten Bronx. Breaking was created by black teenagers along with, and I would argue instigating, the pioneering DJ's, Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash and Afrika Bambaataa, those who Jeff Chang calls the "the three kings, the trinity of hip-hop music," (2005: 90) to spin their records to service of the dancers. These DJ's selected tunes with particularly groovy 'breaks' or rhythm sections, inventing and then perfecting the 'break loop' in order to extend the moment for the b-boys and b-girls to develop their extreme dance moves, cementing the cultural style which is distinctly hip hop. Hip hop scholar Tricia Rose states, "It is the tension between the cultural fractures produced by postindustrial oppression and the binding ties of black cultural expressivity that sets the critical frame for the development of hip hop." (1994: 21)

By the late 70s the ever-evolving interests of adolescence shifted focus as breaking became no longer a 'black thing', and Puerto Rican youngsters of the Bronx took up the dance, forming associations based on the street gang model called 'crews' in order to 'battle' over skill and style. When they too lost interest at the turn of the decade, breaking was championed by Ritchie 'Crazy Legs' Colon who, at fourteen years old, recruited disparate breakers across New York City acting, as Jeff Chang puts it, as a "pre-teen preservationist." (2005: 136) Taking over leadership of the now famous Rock Steady Crew, Crazy Legs brought breaking into regional, national and finally international visibility.

Breaking made that first step towards becoming more widely known to a public beyond its own subcultural borders after the publication of an article published in 1981 in the *Village Voice*.<sup>122</sup> Written by then-graduate student Sally Banes, the article was called 'To the Beat Y' All – Breaking is hard to do', in which she interviewed the Rock Steady Crew. Rock Steady Crew performed in 'Flashdance' in 1983 and with (and battling against) the New York City Breakers in 'Beat Street' in 1984. In 1984, what was now increasingly called 'break-dance,' seemed to have become a national phenomenon, appearing in the movies mentioned, as well as spin-off instructional videos and books ('Breaking with the Mighty Poppalots', 'Let's Break' and 'Breakin' in the USA'); on the cover of *Newsweek*, *Dance Magazine* and the *Ballet News* and probably most spectacularly in the closing ceremonies of the Los Angeles Olympic Games. And then suddenly the media exposure ended, and to mainstream America the dance from the ghetto disappeared. Rap, the lyrically-dominated music of hip hop, pre-empted the dancing of hip hop which became invisible, at least for a period.

The words 'breaking' and 'break-dance' are often used interchangeably, but the implications behind each of the terms are revelatory. The term 'break-dance' began appearing barely a decade after the dance came into being and reached a stable form, but I propose that the new terminology signified two major changes in the dance. Firstly, as several writers at the time,

<sup>122</sup> It was the Manhattan art/punk crowd, equally inspired by the increasingly adventurous and graphically sophisticated graffiti art appearing throughout the city that first embraced the Rock Steady Crew dancers, having them perform in downtown nightclubs such the Negril, the Trasheteria and the Roxy. Although previous to this time graffiti existed alongside the dance and music in the Bronx block parties of the mid-seventies, it is arguably in these downtown venues of the early 80s, as a performance art, that the various elements of hip hop came together as a self-consciously unified force.

including Sally Banes have noticed, as breaking became more popular as a spectator sport, the dancing changed to cater to the new context necessitated by stage performances. Banes writes, “While the dance gained theatrical brilliance, it lost much of its original urgency and vitality, as well the richness of its social meaning.” (1998: 538) Another important change was the mixing of dance styles that were previously distinct, so that locking and popping, at the time referred to as the Electric Boogie in New York City, came to be performed alongside breaking, and breakers included dancers in their crews who were proficient in these forms. It is this taxonomic confusion that street dancers themselves now more commonly take issue with, hence the more recent re-appropriation and favoring of the terms ‘b-boying’ and ‘breaking’ from pre-‘break-dance’ days.<sup>123</sup>

## 2. Critique of early hip hop movies

It must be remembered that America’s music video cable channel, MTV had just been created in 1981, and the teen dance films mentioned earlier were generally criticized by purists for having adopted that genre to become nothing more than one long music video – nice visuals, marketable soundtracks, but weak plots. Although a potent effect of these movies (and music videos) is to trigger a dance craze, neither form takes responsibility for properly naming the dances they portray. Of the movies mentioned earlier, ‘Breakin’ I’ and ‘Breakin’ II: Electric Boogaloo’ in particular were guilty of taking this mixing of styles through the use of recently developed music video montage techniques of cut and paste editing over a soundtrack. The name of the movie didn’t correspond with its dance. Filmed in California, Breakin’ employed as its stars Adolfo ‘Shabadoo’ Quinones, a skilled locker and Michael ‘Boogaloo Shrimp’ Chambers, a talented popper. The two funk dancers had only recently learnt breaking in New York while on tour with Lionel Richie, where they met several members of Rock Steady Crew, and the moments of breaking in the movie are brief and spliced back-to-back with the west coast funk styles. (www.mr.wiggles.biz)

A second problem with these movies is their use and crediting of choreographers, who shaped and distorted the dancing in ways totally alien to its original form. For example, in *Beat Street* there are two main breaking battle sequences, one taking place in the Roxy nightclub, and a second one in the subway. One can deduce that the first has been ‘staged’, or coordinated in order to accommodate the needs of the camera, but the battle form has essentially been kept intact.<sup>124</sup> The second, on the other hand, has been bizarrely choreographed into geometric figures, obviously scripted by Broadway choreographer Lester Wilson. Not surprisingly, the credits for Wilson roll well ahead of the credits for the dancers, who are largely the creators (one could say

<sup>123</sup> It would seem that words and naming operate on an ‘intimate,’ rather than an ‘operative’ level (see Zarrilli 1987). The issue of naming is likely ‘intimate’ because of its closeness to issues of identity. To lump differences under one title is reductive and negates the dedication and work involved in becoming skilled in a particular dance form.

<sup>124</sup> Judging from the film credits, this ‘staging’ was likely done by the New York City Breaker Crew’s manager Michael Holman, also a film director.

the choreographers)<sup>125</sup> of their own movement. It is likely this last scene that caused the Rock Steady Crew to denounce the movie for misrepresenting them and their dance.

A third issue to be taken with these movies is their use of a stock narrative that invariably pits street dance against a more established dance form in what Angela McRobbie calls the 'classic/pop divide' (1997: 216), so that the popular form is often appropriated and only partially legitimized by a relatively pale-skinned woman. This whitewashing of black creativity is as old as minstrelsy, where turn of the century white entertainers dressed up in blackface and profited from their distorted rendition of black folk arts, simultaneously honoring and ridiculing. You can see this trope repeated in 'Flashdance', 'Breakin' I' and II and in the more recent films 'Save the Last Dance'<sup>126</sup> and 'Honey'.

### 3. Transmission of the dance

Breaking – or the corrupted form 'break dance', became popular among low-income minority youth in Montreal in the early 1980s. Of breakers from this short period only a few remain active and visible in the Montreal breaking scene today. I interviewed three people who were breakers at the time (Natasha Jean-Bart, David Dundas and Eugene Poku<sup>127</sup>) and all acknowledged the inspiration that these movies had on them to begin breaking. Dundas (now known in the breaking scene as DKC)'s group New Energy performed regularly at various venues including the Rendez-vous Miller events in the Olympic Stadium before the Expos' games and they opened for James Brown in 1985. The street dance scene did not just consist of stage performances, DKC also remembers battles taking place at a park in the Cote (Côte)-des-Neiges neighbourhood; Eugene Poku remembers battles during dances organized at the Negro Community Centre in Little Burgundy and the Pointe-St-Charles YMCA; but it seems as if there were pockets throughout the city. Language was not an issue, but there were very few white kids present at that time. Crew affiliation was based on neighbourhoods and the scene was relatively friendly. In 1984 video jockey Mike Williams hosted a well-publicized battle at the Spectrum, a large venue on Ste Catherine's Street, which New Energy won. Although this period of breaking activity was relatively short lived, there was a large amount of activity, and the scene was extremely vibrant. In fact, for only a brief period between 1983 and 1986 Dundas estimates that there were between 50 and 100 breakers in the city before losing popularity and reappearing again in the early 1990s.

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<sup>125</sup> See Jackson (2001).

<sup>126</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the gender, class and race dynamics in 'Save the Last Dance', see Boyd (2004).

<sup>127</sup> David Dundas is one of Montreal's most active b-boys, a member of Flow Rock Crew and Legz Crew. Natasha Jean-Bart is a locker and a b-girl, a member of Flow Rock Crew. Eugene Poku formed the locking group the Shaka Dancers in 1974, the acrobatic variety duo Special Blend with his partner Jessie Goldberg in the early 1980s, and now teaches at and co-directs Ashtanga Yoga Montreal.



My question therefore is: how did two-dimensional filmatic representations of a dance instigate a 'lived' culture in various locales, such as Montreal?

A partial answer comes from dance scholars such as Robert Farris Thompson (1966, 1996), Jacqui Malone (1996), Halifu Osumare (1993) and Brenda Dixon-Gottschild (1996) who have identified 'Africanist aesthetics' in African American dancing. Black and Afro-Caribbean youth in Canada and the US would, conceivably share a similar cultural heritage that might help breaking 'make sense' to them and therefore easier for them to absorb. However the same argument cannot be made for the youth in Japan and Germany that took up street dancing. It was probably more likely the oppositional style of the breakers, where a potent combination of rebellion and celebration put motion to music, that international youth identified and allied themselves with, rather than an ethnic affinity, which flirts dangerously with an essentialist assumption of a 'natural' talent for certain types of dance by people of a certain skin colour or ethnic heritage.

It would be important to recognize here that the dances of locking and popping (or Electric Boogie) had already been implanted in Montreal prior to breaking via the small screen of Soul Train – black America's American Bandstand. Finding affirmation in Locking, Eugene Poku channeled his frustrations with the racism he encountered as an immigrant youth (from Ghana), into learning this dance. He formed a group with his siblings called the Shaka Dancers, winning contests, performing on local television – the Canadian equivalent to American Bandstand called 'Feel Like Dancing' and dancing backup for artists such as Quebec funk legend Boule Noir (George Thurston) and even for Celine Dion. Popping groups that existed at the time, before breaking arrived (according to Dundas) were Cosmic Force and Vision Force. These groups 'made flesh' the dances of locking and popping, which made the mixed form of 'break-dance' much more easily assimilated. And, as with Poku, they likely also incorporated the movement of breaking into their performance vocabulary.

It is also important to acknowledge the extreme dedication and discipline that these dancers demonstrated in learning the dances. It was not a spontaneous mimicking of the film dancing. All breakers I interviewed mentioned the hard work of going down into their basements or in schoolyards and figuring out, through trial and error, what they had seen on the screen. This often resulted in scrapes and bruises on their own bodies. The films presented the youth with a skeleton of the dance, its fleshing out taking place on the schoolyards and in basements, where informal practice and peer support build up what the fleeting images of the movies merely suggested. The dance that they figured out was probably more justly named 'break-dance' rather than 'breaking'. The steps of the uprock and the downrock in particular were more difficult to absorb in brief film-watching than the spectacular but relatively un-complex movement of spins and freezes. But it was the beginning of a learning, it created a base of corporal knowledge which was later added to as information became available.

#### **4. Breaking as a dance of the folk**

The academic exercise seems to be to find parallels among dance traditions and seek to draw conclusions from the comparison. The framing of breaking as a folk dance form is not new: just after writing her pivotal article on breaking, Sally Banes presented a paper at the Bronx Folklore Conference in 1981, which included participation of the Rock Steady Crew. (Cooper and Walta,



2004) If we are to consider breaking in its vernacular form as folk dance, we can apply what dance folklorists speak of as dance in its first and second existence (Nahachewsky 2001) – the first being the authentic village taught in what scholar Sheenagh Pietrobruno (2002) calls a ‘lived context’ or informally rather than in revival forms (or ‘second existence’) where the dance is often presented on proscenium stages and taught by specialists rather than by the whole community.

In this light we can see that breaking has looped from a vernacular, lived context, to the media representations of film and back again to a lived, vernacular form. From the ghetto to the silver screen, the dance traveled back to the small-scale, on-the-ground existence, thus regaining its social meaning. This early 80s activity in Montreal set the foundation for its later resurgence from the 1990s to today, in which there is a very vital street dance scene in Montreal and around the world. This process I believe to be an exciting realization in my research and worthy of further investigation.

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APPENDIX B

ARTICLE BY AUTHOR, 2004



# past to present

## hip hop dance in Montréal

by Lys Stevens

"Hip hop is a culture first, it's not a dance. It has four elements: it has graffiti, rapping, DJing, plus the dance (b-boying), that's four, and some people put the MCing, the beat box, as a fifth."

— NATASHA JEAN-BART, FLOW ROCK CREW

Hip hop has mass appreciation today, but its roots go way back. If you wanted to, you could trace them back to Africa, via the Caribbean, New York and Los Angeles. You could track the various dance styles of hip hop culture in a web of intersecting influences, and come up with crystallizations that began forming in the late sixties and early seventies in urban America: b-boying, locking, popping, wacking, punking, jacking, house ... the list goes on and is



David Dundas, Yvon Soglo, Gilbert Baptiste, Éric Martel, Irvin St-Louis, Natasha Jean-Bart, Clauter Alexandre of Flow Rock / Photo by Norm Edwards

# [In the Making}



Yvon Songlo, Natasha Jean-Bart, Irvin St. Louis, Eric Martel, David Dundas, Gilbert Baptiste, Clauter Alexandre of Flow Rock / Photo by Norm Edwards



Anne Plamondon in *Elastic Perspective* by Rubberbandance Group / Photo by Natalie Galazka



Anne Plamondon and Diana Diaz in *Hasta La Proxima* by Rubberbandance Group / Photo by Miriam Schacter

## Learn more >>

[http://hiphop\\_academix.tripod.com](http://hiphop_academix.tripod.com)

<http://mywebpage.netscape.com/buddhafromcfm/flowrocksiteintro.html>

Solid State performs new work from Oct. 7th through 9th at Tangente, Montréal.



added to constantly. The term break dance often acts as a catch-all phrase, blurring the specificity of each style.

The snipped-up and pasted together movement of music videos is what most people see as hip hop. At their best, these images may capture some of the vitality, the essence of what the purer forms can be. At their worst, they promote narrow racial and gender roles embodied in half-baked posturings, marketing clothing almost as well as the music. Either way, these images, good and bad, send youth in droves to take hip hop dance classes, in the eternal quest of the young for fame and fortune, sass and class.

If they are lucky, they land in classes given by dancers who know their foundations. Teachers like Natasha Jean-Bart have spent a lifetime dedicated to digging deeper into the culture in order to nourish their passion for these dances. In classes, such teachers can distinguish between styles. They can dissect and name particular moves such as the Brooklyn Rock in breaking and the wrist roll in locking. They can teach kids the essential skill of freestyle: to spontaneously create movement in response to the music as it is unfolding, rather than to simply copy a particular choreography as seen on TV.

Jean-Bart is a member of Flow Rock, one of Montréal's oldest existing b-boy crews. She specializes in locking, but can break with the best of them. "Locking is about finding your own flavour, with that essence of the seventies," she says. "That's hard, because with [video style] hip hop you copy, you see, and it has to be exactly that way. Locking is about going into the circle and freestyling. Nothing choreographed, you just go. If you are a real locker you have to be able to freestyle."

Learning to freestyle is key to being able to participate in the cypher, the circle where dance battles take place, which is still an important element of the Montréal street dance scene. Events like the weekly Rock Deep Tuesdays at club Saphir, and more formal competitions elsewhere, are where players pull out their moves and rock the floor.

## A Bit of History

Montréal's foundational dancers are second generation, having hooked into hip hop styles in the early eighties through Michael Jackson videos and movies such as *Breakin'*. Jean-Bart explains that groups started popping up in Montréal in the early eighties as dedicated enthusiasts started to organize and work together, battling and performing. New Energy was a crew of b-boys. Jean-Bart joined a group of lockers called Comedies Gang. "I was fourteen and we used to tour the night clubs! I started dancing professionally when I was very young. People were asking for us – for weddings, for all kinds of stuff. We had matching outfits and everything, and that's when I knew that locking was my thing."

The scene faded for a while, and crews broke up. People started doing other things. "Then the hip hop music became really, really slow. It was a mid-tempo rap. I was teaching cardio-funk at this point and I was trying to adjust the pitch of the music all the time because it was too slow. I couldn't teach!" Jean-Bart reminisces, "And then all of a sudden 1994 came around and this friend came back from Belgium with a videotape of Storm, a German b-boy, spinning for two minutes, non-stop, slow, fast, drills, *on his head!* I had never seen that in my life. That's when we woke up, here in Montréal, so everyone started dancing again."

In 1994, Dazl formed Flow Rock, which makes this year their tenth anniversary. For a long time Tactical Crew was their main competitor in Montréal, and eventually other groups formed. Crews began to travel to the other North American cities as more and more events appeared.

Elemental-5 was Montréal's first b-girl crew. While weak technically, they managed to stake some territory for themselves, battling b-boys when there weren't other girls and performing at fundraisers and more commercial gigs as their

skills improved. They surrounded themselves with a posse of women called Solid State, a name that eventually took over as membership and goals mutated. Rather than being a crew, Solid State is a dance collective. By identifying themselves in this way, using a reference more common to contemporary theatrical dance, they indicate their interest in crafting pieces not just for the street or club setting but also for the stage.

Equally, several members of Flow Rock have created Destins Croisés, a dance company directed by Ismael Mouaraki, a popper from France. Rubberbandance is a third Montréal-based dance company that relies heavily on hip hop street-style vocabulary. Several other dancers and groups are beginning to broaden their artistic prospects in this way.

## An Ongoing Dialogue

**Break-dance** (BRAYK dans) *noun phrase*. An energetic style of street-dancing developed in the United States by urban youth.

– *Dictionary of Dance: Words, Terms and Phrases* (Dance Collection Danse Press/es, 1996)

While brief and superficial, the definition above is not as bad as some. Trying to pinpoint a broadly agreed upon lexicon and clear definitions for the family of hip hop street dance styles is hard, especially as the dancers themselves often disagree on the finer details. Questions such as proper vocabulary and the desire for accurate institutional recognition become part of the oral debate surrounding the dance culture.

No wonder the contempo/hip hop performance event in Montréal, now two years old, is called Definitions Non-Applicable (DNA). Individual artists have differing ways of processing and transmitting this meeting of aesthetics and cultures, which cannot necessarily be communicated through a definitive label. However by refusing to set out even tentative definitions, this event provides little room for verbal dialogue.

In contrast, The Hip Hop Symposium, a yearly conference hosted by Students for the Advancement of Hip Hop Culture (SAHC), is an ideal setting for the formal sharing of perspectives, history and ideas. Through presentations, discussions, screenings and “celebrations” (evening events), the SAHC seeks to encourage dialogue within the culture and to broaden the understanding of hip hop within and beyond academia. This year, the third annual symposium was held at Concordia University from March 12<sup>TH</sup> through 14<sup>TH</sup>. It brought Rock Steady crew’s Jorge ‘Fabel’ Pabon (Popmaster Fabel) to give a lecture entitled “The Great Hip Hop Swindle”, which addressed the media and industry domination of hip hop culture, as well as master classes in popping and locking. Passion and integrity towards the dance styles and the culture is evident in this commitment to dialogue through the SAHC.

Dance as a part of hip hop culture is complex and multilayered, its

## Dance as a part of hip hop culture is complex and multi-layered, its future still **unfolding**

remonte loin dans le temps. Les racines se retracent jusqu’en Afrique, via les Caraïbes, New York et Los Angeles. On y retrouve une toile d’influences connexes où se retrouvent les différents styles de danse de la culture hip hop, et des cristallisations de styles qui commencent à la fin des années soixante et au début des années soixante-dix. En pratique actuelle, les styles de danse hip hop apparaissent dans divers contextes, des pistes urbaines et des discothèques traditionnelles jusqu’aux salles de spectacles. Un milieu dynamique d’artistes hip hop foisonne à Montréal ; groupes, collectifs et compagnies expérimentent et explorent le potentiel de cet art. □

future still unfolding. By putting ideas on paper I may make things seem fixed, but this is just one person’s take on what she has filtered through her eyes and ears. This is still a peripheral part of the discussion. Its heart is in the minds and words of the dancers, and most of all, its centre is on the dance floor where what matters most is the movement. □

### Sommaire

« Le hip hop est tout d’abord une culture, non une danse. La culture compte quatre éléments : le graffiti, le rap, les DJs et la danse (le b-boying), cela fait quatre, et certains y ajoutent les MCs, le beat box, comme cinquième élément » explique Natasha Jean-Bart du groupe montréalais Flow Rock Crew. Le hip hop, aujourd’hui une culture aimée par les masses,



## APPENDIX C

### CASE STUDY: *FLOW ROCK* CREW

With the b-boy name Dazl, a young black Montrealer named Irvin St-Louis formed *Down Rock Complex (DRC)* with a friend (DJ Essence) in 1992. That year they performed, opening for the American rapper Craig Mack at the Metropolis. This was the pre-cursor to the *Flow Rock* crew, what was to become one of Montreal's strongest breaking crews through the 1990s.

In 1994 *DRC* became *Flow Rock*, and new members Gilbert Baptiste (Freezer), Éric Martel (Zig) and Clauter Alexandre (Dr. Step) joined. David Dundas (DKC), the oldest member of the group, also joined, reviving his breakdance skills from the early 1980s when he was a key member of the crew *New Energy*. In 1998 Natasha Jean-Bart (previously a member of the locking group *Comedies Gang*) joined the crew as b-girl Tash.

Throughout the 1990s *Flow Rock* crew performed in music venues opening for touring rap artists such as *KRS-One*, *Naughty by Nature* and *NAS*, as well as at special events. With their arc-rivals, *Tactical* crew, *Flow Rock* dominated the Montreal breaking scene. The competition, both for the commercial gigs and at breaking battles, between the two crews was fierce. *Flow Rock* prided themselves on a more refined sense of musicality and dance technique, claiming that *Tactical* crew depended more heavily on the spectacular 'power moves'.

*Flow Rock* frequently busked for change for tourists in the Old Port, developing their theatrical skills. In 2001 *Flow Rock* was invited to present a 45-minute choreography at the prestigious jazz festival Nancy Jazz Pulsations in France. Following this event, four members (Natasha Jean-Bart, Gilbert Baptiste, Clauter Alexandre and Éric Martel) were invited by a French popper by the name of Ismaël Mouaraki to perform in a dance company he called *Destins croisés*. This caused serious divisions in the group, as Irvin St-Louis and David Dundas did not appreciate the form mutations affected by the contemporary dance aesthetic. In 2002 the group was invited by Louis Robitaille, artistic director of *BJM*, to share their Parc Lafontaine stage performance. Jean-Bart accepted the offer on behalf of *Destins croisés*, presenting a work in progress of *Futur Proche*, the company's first creation. In 2003 the completed version of the work was presented during the *Définition non applicable* event at le Maison de la Culture Frontenac with help from Usine C. Soon after this *Flow Rock* members of *Destins croisés* began leaving the dance company.

By 2007 *Flow Rock* has become increasingly less active as a unified crew. Irvin St-Louis is focused on House Dance and David Dundas (still Montreal's oldest active b-boy), heads his own crew of former students, *Legz*. Clauter Alexandre and Éric Martel teach b-boying at the school Urban Element, getting a chance to choreograph at end-of-session performances. Martel often judges organized battles and Alexandre hosts both the Urban Element shows and the event *Bust a Move!* Jean-Bart has moved to Las Vegas where she is performing for the Cirque du Soleil. Baptiste is the only

member to stay with Mouaraki's *Destins croisés*, participating in an intensive residency in Europe in 2006 with new recruits (including K8 Alsterlund/b-girl Lynx).

## APPENDIX D

### CASE STUDY: *RUBBERBANDANCE GROUP*

In 2002 b-boy and professional dancer Victor Quijada formed *Rubberbandance Group*, a contemporary dance company uniting local b-boys and professionally-trained dancers. *RBDG* choreographies examine humanity and human relationships through a unique fusion of classical ballet, post-modern dance and freestyle hip hop. Anne Plamondon, a dancer he met while dancing for *Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal*, joined the group in 2002 as a performer and since 2005 acts as co-artistic director of the company, in recognition of her contribution towards the contributed highly to the growth and development of the company. Other dancers in the company include Joe-Danny Aurélien or Dingo (*RedMask* crew), Jacques Eloï or Jayko (*Tactical* crew), Emmanuelle Lê Phan or Cleopatra (*Dysfunkshn*, *Solid State Breakdance Collective*).

Before forming his company, Victor Quijada danced with *Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal* for two years, an engagement that brought him to Montreal from New York City where he had been dancing for post-modern choreographer Twyla Tharp. Previous to that he worked for two years with his mentor Rudy Perez and the Rudy Perez Ensemble. His formal dance training began at the Los Angeles County High School for the Arts, but previous to that he had been breakdancing since the age of eight. Throughout his professional career as a dancer his love for hip hop and the freestyle cypher has not ceased, finding a space to dance at nightclubs wherever he has been located.

While his first choreographic forays were presented at the Joyce Soho in New York City and, while dancing for *LGBC*, at Studio 303 in Montreal, Quijada's first piece with *Rubberbandance Group*, *Tender Loving Care* premiered at Espace Tangente in May 2002. Two more creations premiered there: *Hasta La Proxima* (2002) and *Metabolism* (2003). In the 2003-2004 season *RBDG* was the resident company at Usine C and created *Slicing Static*, a site-specific work voted Best Dance Production of 2004 by the Montreal Mirror. *RBDG* has performed at both hip hop and contemporary dance festivals throughout North America, Europe, and recently in Japan as a Canadian representative at EXPO 2005. Other highlights include performances at the Fall for Dance Festival at City Center in New York, Breakin' Convention at Sadler's Wells in London, ACT Festival '04 at the Rotterdamse Schouwburg in Holland, and URB Festivaali at Kiasma in Helsinki, Finland.

## APPENDIX E

### CASE STUDY: *SOLID STATE BREAKDANCE COLLECTIVE*

*Solid State Breakdance Collective* was created in 2000 as both a support network for women wanting to train in breaking or 'breakdance' dance technique and for them to perform. Initially the group was fourteen members strong, initiated by and including several members of the *Ellementale-5* b-girl crew, and including the *Dysfunkshn* b-girl crew and other individuals. The group evolved into a dance company with a mandate to challenge audience perceptions of urban dance forms. The numbers of the collective whittled down over the years as this professional contemporary dance mandate became more refined. They now call their performance style Urban Dance Theatre and are no longer a collective but are directed by original members JoDee Allen and Helen Simard.

In 2000, the group performed during the Montreal's Divers/Cité Festival, their second time on stage as *Solid State*. Since 2001, *Solid State* has created five choreographies – *Pas De Baskets* (2001), *Showdown, no we won't Slowdown!* (2001), *Etch-a-sketch* (2003), *It's not you... It's me...* (2004) and *Take it Back* (2006) presented at contemporary dance venues such as Espace Tangente, Montréal, Arts Interculturel, during festivals such as the St. Sauveur Arts Festival, the Montreal St. Ambroise Fringe Festival, Dusk Dances Festival in Toronto and at various schools. The group has performed over 250 times, both these choreographies and 'freestyle performances, their structured improvisations at nightclubs, corporate events, music venues, fundraisers and street festivals. Individuals in the group regularly teach breakdance technique, particularly through the Studio Sweatshop, a studio space and business owned by Simard and Allen. Regular classes and occasional fundraiser b-boy/b-girl battles are organized in this space.

Around 2004 the group began shifting away from full-group collective creations where all of the members participated in the creative process, with the style and ideas of each dancer being incorporated into the finished work and each member participating as a dancer, choreographer and movement coach. By the creation of *Take it Back* in 2006, artistic direction lay squarely on the shoulders of Helen Simard and JoDee Allen. Many of the other original core members (Claudia Fancello, Emmanuelle Lê Phan, Kamilya Copney, Pamela Schneider, Danielle Rankin, Susan Iliyan and Maureen Grant) had left the group. Dana Schnitzer remained involved as a dancer and on a special education project, and early member Jen Casimir returned as a dancer. New, non-choreographing dancers joined the company for particular performances, including b-boys Joe Danny Aurélien (*RedMask* crew), Raul Guevara (b-boy 4everfresh), Julia Gutsik (also a dancer for *Rubberbandance Group*) and Johnny Walker Bien-Aimé (Skywalker).

APPENDIX F

SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS  
(CHOREOGRAPHER)



- 1) Introduce purpose, concept of thesis
- 2) Sign release form
- 3) Personal history (age & styles of dancing) What influence were films such as Breakin', Beat Street, Flashdance, videos such as Michael Jackson, etc. have on you?
- 4) What are your stylistic influences?
- 5) What was your impetus for choreographing using freestyle hip hop forms?
- 6) What is the difference in your eyes between Contemporary fusions & Street dance?
- 7) What is the difference between stage shows and contemporary fusions? How much does music video-style dance influence what you create (or how it is perceived?)
- 8) How did you choreograph your last piece?
  - a. How much hip hop vocabulary did you use, and how would you characterize it?
  - b. How much of non-hip hop vocabulary did you use, and how would you characterize it?
  - c. What was the balance between freestyling vs. set combinations?
  - d. How did you choose a theme/unifying concept?
  - e. How did you apply the theme to the movement?
- 9) What are the challenges of creating a contemporary dance piece using a hip hop vocabulary and a freestyle form? What is the difference between working in a crew vs. a company? What is the difference working with primarily street dancers vs. working with people with contemporary dance training?
- 10) How does the audience(s) receive the work? What fidelity do you feel towards the freestyle, street dance community? Do you sense any conflicts there?

APPENDIX G  
LIST OF INTERVIEWS

### **Transcribed interviews with author**

Alsterlund, K8 (b-girl Lynx) – Montreal, March 18, 2006.

Bien-Aimé, Johnny Walker (Skywalker) – Montreal, March 7, 2006.

Dundas, David (DKC) – Montreal, January 29, 2006.

Fancello, Claudia (Viva Mancina) – Montreal, November 23, 2004.

Goldberg, Jessie – Montreal, March 27, 2006.

Jean-Bart, Natasha (b-girl Tash) – Montreal, May 28, 2004.

Poku, Eugene – Montreal, March 27, 2006.

Quijada, Victor – Montreal, March 24, 2005.

Schnitzer, Dana (b-girl Radio)– Montreal, November 13, 2004.

### **Un-transcribed interviews and informal conversations with author**

Balkan, Donna – Ottawa, April 11, 2004.

Alsterlund, K8 (b-girl Lynx) – Montreal, October 2004; March 2006; October 2006.

Baptiste, Gilbert (Freezer) – Montreal, April 2006.

Jean-Bart, Natasha (b-girl Tash) – Montreal, September 2002.

Laabadi, Myriam – Montreal, January 27, 2006.

Mouaraki, Ismaël – Montreal, February 2006.

Simard, Helen – Montreal, May 2004.

APPENDIX H  
CONSENT FORMS OF INTERVIEWEES

By alphabetical order

K8 Alsterlund (b-girl Lynx)

Johnny Walker Bien-Aimé (Skywalker)

David Dundas (DKC) (missing)

Claudia Fancello (Viva Mancina)

Jessie Goldberg

Natasha Jean-Bart (b-girl Tash)

Eugene Poku

Victor Quijada

Dana Schnitzer (b-girl Radio) (missing)

### Release Form

The purpose of this sound recording is for the gathering of information related to research on hip hop street dance in Montreal. This research will be used toward a written masters thesis produced for the Department of Dance at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) by Lys Stevens.

Selected information from these recordings will be used:

- as written citations in the thesis
- as examples in order to support statements in the written work
- as part of conclusions in the written work

Research on this subject may also be used as part of further work which may be published or presented in an academic conference context.

All original facts, statements and citations will, in all cases, be properly credited.

I consent to being recorded, with the understanding that the recording will be used for the purposes as stated above.

Name: Kate (K8) ALSTERLUND

Pseudonym: b girl Lynx

Signature: 

Date: Oct. 19, 2006

Email address/phone number: k8alsterlund@gmail.com  
514-804-8643

☒ I would like to be notified in the case that my words and name will appear in a printed publication or spoken in the context of an academic conference.

☒ I would like a copy of the thesis prior to finalization in order to make comments. (Comments may or may not be taken into consideration in the final version.)

☒ I would like a copy of the thesis after finalization for my own interest.

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All original facts, statements and citations will, in all cases, be properly credited.

I consent to being recorded, with the understanding that the recording will be used for the purposes as stated above.

Name: Bien-Aime Johnny-Walker

Pseudonym: skywalker

Signature: 

Date: 7-03-2006

Email address/phone number: JedHigh@hotmail.com

☐ I would like to be notified in the case that my words and name will appear in a printed publication or spoken in the context of an academic conference.

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I consent to being recorded, with the understanding that the recording will be used for the purposes as stated above.

Name: CLAUDIA FANCELLO AKA VIVA MANJIVA

Pseudonym: ~~JA~~

Signature: 

Date: June 8 2006

Email address/phone number: vivabea@xhoo.com  
514 562-5934

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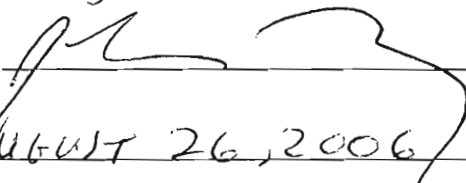
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I consent to being recorded, with the understanding that the recording will be used for the purposes as stated above.

Name: JESSICA GOLDBERG

Pseudonym: JISGIB

Signature: 

Date: AUGUST 26, 2006

Email address/phone number: EUGENEJESSIE@YAHOO.CA  
514-935-6489

☒ I would like to be notified in the case that my words and name will appear in a printed publication or spoken in the context of an academic conference.

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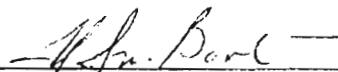
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I consent to being recorded, with the understanding that the recording will be used for the purposes as stated above.

Name: NATASHA JEAN-BART

Pseudonym: TASH

Signature: 

Date: 05/03/07

Email address/phone number: TASHNATONE@HOTMAIL.COM  
702.637.7262

☐ I would like to be notified in the case that my words and name will appear in a printed publication or spoken in the context of an academic conference.

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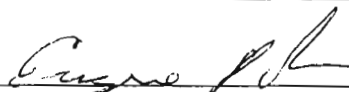
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All original facts, statements and citations will, in all cases, be properly credited.

I consent to being recorded, with the understanding that the recording will be used for the purposes as stated above.

Name: EUGENE POKU

Pseudonym: MR SHAKKA

Signature: 

Date: AUGUST 26, 2006

Email address/phone number: eugenejessie@yahoo.ca  
514-935-6489

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All original facts, statements and citations will, in all cases, be properly credited.

I consent to being recorded, with the understanding that the recording will be used for the purposes as stated above.

Name: VICTOR QUIJADA

Pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: 

Date: APRIL 5, 2007

Email address/phone number: victor@ribbonanddancegroup.com

☒ I would like to be notified in the case that my words and name will appear in a printed publication or spoken in the context of an academic conference.

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APPENDIX I  
EVENT ANALYSIS MODEL

**Title:**

**Creator(s):**

**Performers:**

**Dates:**

**Location:**

**Cost:**

**1. Frame** (about expectations)

(Where:)

- 1.1 Performance space
- 1.2 Promotional material
- 1.3 Program (title, notes)

(When:)

- 1.4 Beginnings and endings; distinction between game and spectacle; extended or contained event

**2. Elements or component**

(Who:)

- 2.1 Dance-maker/organizer
- 2.2 Non-dancing participants
- 2.3 Dancers (number, gender, gaze, training, roles, etc.)

(What:)

- 2.4 Visual environment (set, props, costumes, lighting, projections)
- 2.5 Sound environment
- 2.6 Description by sections (break into natural divisions, identify transitions)

**3. Style** (cultural identity)

- 3.1 Quality: description informed by metaphors, Africanist Aesthetics and to a lesser degree by Laban Movement Analysis
- 3.2 Characteristic use of parts of the body & symbolic associations
- 3.3 Genre: style of the dance, choreographer, performer

**4. Vocabulary** (lexicon)

**5. Syntax** (rules governing movement)

- 5.1 Construction: collectively vs. choreographer vs. individualism
- 5.2 Autonomy of interpreter (unison vs. individualism)
- 5.3 Rules: mimesis, pathos, or parataxis

(Why:)

**6. Motivation**

**7. Evaluation/reception**

- 7.1 Effectiveness and appropriateness of the choreography
- 7.2 Effectiveness and appropriateness of the performance

APPENDIX J

LIST OF EVENTS FORMALLY ANALYZED

- 1) Break Funk Hip Hop Evening  
February 28, 2004, Usine C
- 2) Eccentric Cypher  
March 21, 2004, Studio Mange Mes Pieds
- 3) Rubberbandance Group performing *Slicing Static*  
September 23, 2004, Usine C
- 4) Solid State Breakdance Collective performing *It's Not You... It's me*  
October 7, 2004, Tangente
- 5) Becozwehav2 performing *je suis née sur un bateau de pirates*  
November 20, 2005, Tangente
- 6) Urban Element students performing *Flick or Trick*  
December 11, 2005, Théâtre Outremont
- 7) Alexandra L'Heureux's hip hop class  
January 10, 2006, Circuit Est
- 8) Solid State Breakdance Collective performing *It's Not You... It's me* (2<sup>nd</sup> version)  
January 28, 2006, Tangente
- 9) Call Out - February  
February 5, 2006, Urban Element
- 10) Call Out – March  
March 5, 2006, Urban Element
- 11) Bonnie and Clyde War is War battle  
February 25, 2006, Usine C
- 12) Jodee Allan breaking class  
February 27, 2006, Studio Sweatshop
- 13) Skywalker breaking class  
March 2 to 31, 2006, Graffiti Café
- 14) K8's practice session





APPENDIX K  
MONTREAL BREAKING TIMELINE

1974

- Eugene Poku (age 14) sees the *Lockers* on *Soul Train* and forms a locking group called the *Shaka Dancers* with his siblings. They win the Creative Black Arts Award given by the NDG Negro Community Center, and over the next several years dance back-up for artists such as Boule Noir and a young Celine Dion.

1979

- The *Shaka Dancers* become the *Shaka Brothers* with Eugene and his brother as the sisters drop out. They perform on the CFCF-12 show *Feel Like Dancing*, the Montreal equivalent to *Soul Train*.
- Other funk style dance groups at the time are *Vision Force* and *Cosmic Force*.

1981

- DKC sees breaking in NYC.
- MTV launched, 24-hours of non-stop music videos.

1982

- *Style Wars* comes to Montreal with scenes of breaking.

1983

- Montreal sees Michael Jackson on the TV special *Motown 25: Yesterday, Today, Forever*, singing *Billie Jean* and performing a tightly choreographed dance routine. *Flashdance* is released, showing more breakdancing.

1984

- Montreal sees *Breakin'* and *Beat Street*.
- The *Shaka Brothers* open for the *New York City Breakers* who perform at the Palais de Congrès.
- Competition battle at the Spectrum organized and hosted by Mike Williams, DJ/VJ. Eugene Poku performs a routine. *New Energy* wins the battle.
- Montreal Acrobatic Dancers (MAD is the first place in the city offering street dance classes. It operates for about three years and acts as a street dance community center.
- Tash dances in the locking group *Comedies Gang*.

1985

- *New Energy* opens for James Brown.

1986

- *New Energy* plans to attend a battle in the US but at the last minute it's cancelled. Breaking simmers down in Montreal.

1992

- *Down Rock Complex (DRC)*, one of the first of the new generation of b-boy crews in Montreal forms. Initiated by Dazl and DJ Essence, they open for American rapper Craig Mack at the Metropolis.

1993

- *House of Pride*, a voguing performance group forms, winning the *World Ball for Unity* for 3 years (until it ended in 1995).

1994

- *Dope Squad* crew performs at the Théâtre Patro le Prévost on Christophe Colomb Ave as part of a hip-hop show.
- *DRC* becomes *Flow Rock* as new members join, including DKC, Freezer, Zig and Dr. Step.
- The *Rock Gym* on Ste. Catherine street is the place for crews to practice.

1995

- Goldylocks begins organizing events and breaking competitions in Montreal.

1996

- *Tactical* crew forms out of *Sub Connection*, the *Golden Breakers* and the *Scalphunters*. This is a mega-crew to rival *Flow Rock*, as the two crews become the main Montreal crews. *Dope Squad* dissolves.

1997

- Walken of the *Montreal Breakers* opens a school in the Belgo Building on Ste Catherine.

1998

- Tash joins *Flow Rock*, her three kids now in elementary school, she has more time to devote to dancing.
- *RedMask* forms, students of *Tactical* members, Oktofoot, Dingo, Klish, Bambino, Thundablast, Rockit.
- *Area 51* and *Illmatic Styles* also form (late nineties).
- *Ellementale-5* forms, training with b-boy Radar and Shockwave (Ben Jonas).
- The first *Rock On* organized by Goldylock Productions takes place at the Medley. This event lasts for 3 years. *Flow Rock* boycotts battle. One-on-one b-boy battle won by b-boy Torpedo from Quebec City. B-girl Lynx battles

another woman, wins and takes opportunity to grab the microphone and call women to breaking.

- *Strickly Breaks* – the battle between *Flow Rock* and *Tactical* is fierce. Judges Asian One and Easy Rock from *Rock Steady* crew. *Ellementale-5* battles and win against an ad-hoc b-girl crew.
- (August) *Gravity Rock* yearly b-boy battle in NDG begins.

1999

- 3 Times Dope Productions founded by Skywalker, Omegatron, and Chollo, to promote breakdancing and all aspects of hip hop culture. They eventually begin a monthly battle series, *Call-Outs* at Foufounes Électriques.
- *Solid State* forms, perform at *Amalgastylee Massive* (June) and *Flexx* (July).

2000

- Victor Quijada arrives in Montreal to dance with *LGBC* and starts clubbing.
- *On the Good Foot*, battle at club Soda.
- The crews *Legz*, *701 Squad*, *Endless Sky* form (early 2000s).
- *War is War* annual event begins, produced by 3 Times Dope.

2001

- (February) *Out of the Shadows* event, Tangente (curated by Joe Hiscott and KJ Starship; *Solid State*, Martha Carter, Brad Denys, George Stamos, & Jenn Goodwin participate).
- (February) *Tactical* performs a short piece alongside contemporary dance companies such as Flak and O Vertigo at le Place-des-arts for the *Festival en Lumière*.
- (October) *Flow Rock* presents a 45-minute choreography in Nancy, France.
- (November) *Solid State*: Showdown Tangente, semaine scolaire.
- (November) *Kafig* (France), Usine C.
- Victor Quijada's first choreography presented at Studio 303.

2002

- Victor quits *LGBC* to form *Rubberbandance Group*.
- *Destins croisés* forms.
- First annual *Hip Hop Symposium* (yearly event lasting four years).
- (April) Rennie Harris's *Pure Movement* (US), Danse Danse.
- (May) *RBDG*: Tender Loving Care, Tangente.
- (June) *Solid State*: Showdown, Fringe Fest Tour, Mtl & Ottawa.
- (July) *Just for Laughs* starts presenting breaking battles as part of its festival.
- (July/August) *Destins croisés* performs a work in progress at the Theatre de la Verdure.
- (fall) K8 Alsterlund's open breaking jam at 10 Ontario begins (later moves to 10 Pine).

- (November) *RBDG: Hasta La Proxima*, Tangente.
- (December) *Out of the Shadows: Movement Phénomène* at SAT (curated by KJS; with *RBDG*, George Stamos, Flint Eagle, Ruby Rowat & DJs participate).

## 2003

- (March/April) *DNA: RBDG; Solid State*; Jordi Ventura; *Destins croisés*.
- (April) *Hush Hush Hush* (Belgium) present Bobo in Paradise, Usine C.
- (August) Eccentric Cypher – innovative battle format organized by K8 Alsterlund (five editions to date).
- (October) 4<sup>th</sup> edition of *War is War* at the SAT.

## 2004

- *Call Outs* are moved to Urban Dance Element on Jean Talon.
- (January/February) *DNA: Ewine danse/Serge Takri; Nicholasleichterdance* (NY); Sarah Febraro, K8 Alsterlund, Sophia Gaspard & 4Temps.
- (February) *Kafig* (France) Corps est graphique, Usine C.
- (September) *RBDG: Slicing Static*, Usine C.
- (October) *Solid State: It's Not You... It's Me...* (1<sup>st</sup> version) Tangente.

## 2005

- (February) *War is War* at Usine C.
- (November) *Bust a Move!* Montreal's Street dance convention (battles, several styles), Kola Note (four editions to date).
- (November) *Becozwehav2: je suis née sur un bateau de pirates*, Tangente.

## 2006

- (January) Not You (2<sup>nd</sup> version), *Solid State*, Tangente.
- (March/April) b-boy WD-40 (Forty Nguyen) performs with Pigeons International, Usine C.
- (August) *Antidote*, choreographed by Victor Quijada on the Jeune Ballet de Québec presented at the Festival des arts de St-Sauveur and the Théâtre de Verdure, Parc Lafontaine.
- (October) Take It Back, by *Solid State*, Tangente.
- (December) *American Pro-Ams 10 Year Anniversary* – high-level battle, first time in Montreal.

## APPENDIX L

PERFORMANCE REVIEW BY AUTHOR, 2007



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## Reviews & Responses

*Reviews and responses are posted in language of origin. |  
Les critiques et incidences sont postées dans leur langue d'origine.*

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### Two Takes on the Same Show

"Take it Back" by Solid State

by Philip Szporer and by Lys Stevens

Montreal: Oct 19-29, 2006

### Take One: Gender Politics on the Dance Floor

by Philip Szporer

Solid State's new work, "Take it Back", is a dance that crosses boundaries, re-sourcing the language of hip hop and the Lindy, presenting elements of street dance and swing in a theatrical setting. The artistic directors and choreographers of the Montréal-based B-girl group, JoDee Allen and Helen Simard, are vocal and articulate about the cross-referencing, and what they do creatively evades the commercial exploitation that is often found in the popular growth of urban dance.



Helen Simard in "Take it Back" by JoDee Allen and Simard / Photo by Melissa Gobeil

The one-hour production, which is divided into sections, fundamentally challenges the representations of and politics surrounding the notion of men and women dancing together. "Take it Back" investigates the realm of dancing in partners, and celebrates what attracts people to each other on the dance floor. The directors have worked collaboratively with their dancers and have gleaned information from dance nights at some of Montreal's swinging-est swing clubs (Cat's Corner, to name one). What they've come up with is not so much an historical celebration of street dance, but a lesson in what can come across on the dance floor if 1940s Lindy hop swing dancing, freestyle dancing, locking, popping, rocking and breakdancing meet on the same ground as contemporary dance aesthetics. The emphasis often shifts between high energy, acrobatic moves and a more poetic, reflective quality. Sometimes the shifts are effortless, sometimes not, and that contributes to an unsettled energy in the work.

As Tangente's artistic director Dena Davida made perfectly clear at the start of the show, the production is a significant shift for this women's collective: "Tonight, guys are dancing with the gals." Ground-breaking, at least from the company's gender perspective, in many ways "Take it Back" solidifies another key to the group's ethos: to entertain the

December 14, 2007

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audience and, palpably, to entertain themselves in the process.

The dance expertly demonstrates the awkwardness and joy that everyone can experience from dancing, cheek-to-cheek or alone. The vocabulary in the show is physically demanding: whether it's in the Lindy sequences, which rely on the pure momentum of the swings and volleys between the partners, or in the dynamic practices of breaking or rocking (whether top rocking, and just grooving to the music, or uprocking in a battle between two dancers).

Our first glimpse of the stage, fringed by a few chairs scattered around the edge, reveals the dancers (Allen, Simard, Joe Danny Aurelien and Raul Guevera), apparently playing dress-up. In fine duds, they're getting ready for a family photo, posing, grinning, with a kind of wide-eyed innocence, all to the sounds of a big-band-era tune. We get a sense quite quickly that all is not right with this picture: lanky Guevera squirms. He fingers his pant leg, seems a little uncertain, and then gets back into the pose. It doesn't take a few seconds before he's at it again, crouching, tappin' his toes, restless. Eventually he starts -- and is soon followed by Aurelien -- spinning, working through footwork, freezes and popular power moves: a dolphin-like headstand or the downward diving worm. And so the evening of fierce invention begins.

Later we see the two talented B-girls assertively working through their own rocking action and breaking moves, shifting directions forward and back. In the past, Solid State has always been loud and clear on the score that they, as representatives of a generation of young women, are here to challenge the accepted gender norm on the break dance floor. But with this production, Allen and Simard are asking themselves another fundamental post-feminism question -- when did guys stop asking women to dance?

The message in "Take it Back" is that both roles -- male and female -- are essential to dancing. The traditional leader and follower roles are challenged to the hilt, with the important statement that the follower is as valued as the leader. The women rebuff the guys often, and find themselves dancing solo, but there's a clear desire on the gals' parts to have a spin with the guys, to be acknowledged as both partners and breakers. That's the storyline in the piece. It's performed in a gawky way, kind of like non-dancer actors doing the best they possibly can but never quite getting in the groove because of a lack of technical skill. The work also plays with ideas about physical contact and sexuality in dance, in that the Lindy portions hark back to an earlier set of gender conventions on the dance floor; whereas, the contemporary urban sequences are a more aggressive and hyper-sexualized display. Not all of "Take it Back" is so serious in intention -- there are laughs and some character work that charms in this playful urban, theatrical break dance comedy.

When the couples get to the final Lindy section, the styling seems relaxed. Their bodies move fluidly from side to side, the footwork nice'n'easy, and executed so well that the dance is a joy to watch (and probably as much to do). Here again, the meaning is in the physical relationships. Leading or following, both partners are riffing off each other, communicating through their bodies. This is conveyed in delectable little ways -- how they locate the centre of the movement, how they shift balance and direction. The dancers respond in a seemingly improvisational way to the ideas they hear in the infectious big-band music played in this section. The dance just seems to evolve and grow. By the time that the dancers pull two audience members on stage and lure them into the dance, everyone is smiling broadly.

Finally, playing with the notion of freedom -- whether it's the powerful



gravity-defying movements of both the guys and the gals or the postures and positions of intense physicality -- Allen and Simard are contemplating new relationships. The dancemakers are finding a way to remove a forced gender reading, and emphasizing a give-and-take. At the core of the show, Solid State is really saying, "Get out and dance", and let's have partners as powerful as ourselves. The desire is to shift the meaning, in this case of how a man and woman can be on the dance floor together.

## Take Two: A History Lesson

by Lys Stevens

I didn't attend the performance of "Take it Back" primarily to write a review. I brought my notebook to the show simply because I've learned, over time, that I will enjoy dance performances much more if I can funnel my impressions directly into a

concrete form in the moment of experiencing them. Caught in darkness, in chairs bolted to the floor, restrained by the codes of the theatre, the absorption of a performance has to have, for me, some kind of outlet - a physical response being so clearly restricted. It's an irony, particularly so for staged dances originally formed out of a participatory imperative, but one that does not entirely escape the choreographers of this genre.



JoDee Allen in "Take it Back" by Allen and Helen Simard / Photo by Melissa Gobeil

This is why near the end of "Take it Back", when co-director and dancer Helen Simard approached the audience -- clearly sizing us up for participation -- rather than shrink, as my peers apparently did around me, I graciously put aside my notebook and smiled at her. Yes, I would accept this invitation to dance. And so I missed the last section of the performance as a viewer. Instead I engaged in a small but significant gesture of blurring the lines between seating and stage, audience and performer. It was fittingly symbolic of one of the central issues this piece hoped to address: why do young people not dance socially in couples anymore?

Some history: Solid State has changed quite a bit over the years since its inception in 2000. The company began as a support group for women who wanted to breakdance, and very quickly became focussed on performing both structured and "freestyle" choreographies. Formally known as Solid State Breakdance Collective, it is only very recently that they have dropped the word "breakdance" from their name, reflecting their increasing foray into other popular and vernacular dances such as house and, as "Take It Back" so clearly demonstrates, swing or the Lindy Hop.

Breaking is the more accurate term for the Bronx-originated dance comprised of the upright footwork of the up rock, the flying foot and hand maneuvering of the down rocks, and the distinctive power moves often based on centripetal motion (head spin, windmill, etc.). It is a solo dance performed in a circle of peers, often competitively, as dancers try to outdo each other in terms of style and technique. The word "breakdance" was only coined and became current after breaking became popular in the early 1980s (a good decade after its first beginnings as a party dance). It was performed as a spectacle by youth, who often incorporated other street dances, namely what was then called the "electric boogie". Though they no longer reference the specific term, it is nonetheless still fitting for Solid State's work in that they create "shows" for audiences and have increasingly incorporated

"other" movement vocabulary into their breaking technique.

The group's interest in the Lindy Hop was evident throughout the various incarnations of their previous piece, "It's Not You... It's Me...". In the first version of that piece, Emmanuelle LePhân closed the show with a lilting and nostalgic Lindy-inspired solo, danced to a jazz standard. In the second version of that piece, the concept had transformed into a duet. It seems, however, as if the possibilities and the inspiration of the Lindy Hop were too strong to leave at that, and so the Solid State group developed an entire piece in and around the partner dance. The need to break away from the partnership within the Lindy, and other delicious transgressions which link it to breaking, were surely among its multiple influences. For me, the most successful part of "Take It Back" was the easy slippage between the two forms, demonstrating their historical connection in movement more eloquently than words.

"Take It Back" takes us back to a 1930s-style Lindy Hopping ballroom. It meanders through variations on the push-pull dynamic of social dance partnering. Will you reject me? Are you good enough to dance with me? Can I keep up to your style, your technique, your aesthetic? Can we bliss out in this magic of communion in the energetic dynamic between two individuals, between that temporary and improvised unity and the music that propels us?

But there is no sugarcoating in this ballroom. The euphoria of partnered flight and jive, of Harlem Renaissance in embodied celebration, is only half of the picture. The angst of judgment is also explored as one of the darker aspects of social dance encounters. While the four individuals in this ballroom take turns tripping off on happy solo explorations, they do so under the watchful and critical eyes of their peers. The moments they successfully come together in a joyful pairing are few. I probably missed the most eloquent one in that last sequence, absorbed as I was in my very basic footwork and light conversation with my old acquaintance, Simard. For me, the question "why not partner dance?" seemed to be answered in "Take It Back" with "because the risk of rejection is just too damn scary." But then, maybe that's the thing with social dance -- you kind of have to be in it, in order to get it.

Another key change in the Solid State profile is again represented by a word dropped from their name. The word "collective" is no longer in their company title. What began as a group of fourteen women is now reduced to two core choreographers, Helen Simard and JoDee Allen. Presumably they still choreograph and administrate the company collectively, but it's not the same strong force of constant negotiation and compromise between many female voices. I am completely sympathetic about the heavy toll that large collective mediation takes on a creative entity, but I still hold some nostalgia for the feminist utopia, best represented in their 2003 work "Etch-a-sketch".

The inclusion of men in their works may be a new development to a Tangente-going audience, but not revolutionary to their practice. Solid State has long been hiring b-boys for some of their school performances. Thankfully Allen and Simard didn't use their men as backdrops in the pursuit of maintaining a female-positive presence. Raul Guevera (b-boy 4EverFresh) was the surprise and the gem of the performance for me. I had heard he was a great b-boy, deserving of the winning title at the Bonnie and Clyde battle last February and of the opportunity to attend the Redbull Beatriders summer b-boy/b-girl intensive in 2006. I was charmed to see not only his dynamic breaking style, performed with facility and clarity, but also his ease at characterization and dramatization. Joe Danny Aurelien (b-boy Dingo) was already one of my favorite freestyle cypher dancers, a smooth and floating movement style. With considerable stage experience, Aurelien is

also an original member of the Red Mask crew.

Please don't be fooled into assuming that Solid State is the only representation of b-girls in Montréal, just because they are the most visible. Breaking has long been criticized for being a boys' club, a sentiment often expressed by Solid State both in interviews and in their choreographic parodies. To be fair, both Solid State and their precursor, the Ellemental-5 crew (active in 1998), were largely responsible for drawing b-girls into the cypher and inviting them to adopt the dance. But by now, the number of excellent girl breakers in the city is respectable.

"Take It Back" is a history lesson, but a history lesson of the most valuable kind. It doesn't attempt literal or linear accuracy, but it brings a dance to life in all its social complexity. While hip hop may be the hook (and still some of the meat) in "Take it Back" simply because that is what audiences expect of Solid State, the piece weaves as its main thread a dance that had its heyday generations ago. But the Lindy Hop has a wealth of inspiration to offer dance enthusiasts today, as this piece so eloquently demonstrates.

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## LEXICON

### Glossary of terms

**Battle** – a competition wherein the best dancer wins, either by crowd approval or judged.

**B-boy, b-girl or breaker** – someone proficient in the ‘breaking’ style of dance. The ‘b’ in b-boy may stand for ‘beat’, ‘breaker’ or the ‘Bronx’.

**Blow-up** – elaborate winning moves which involve some planning and tend to end a sequence.

**Breakdance** – a term often misused to refer to breaking, it more accurately describes the mixture of breaking and funk styles common in early 1980s dance movies.

**Breaking or b-boying** – consists of upright footwork, acrobatic floorwork and impressive ‘power moves’ that use centrifugal motion of the entire body while on or close to the floor.

**Burn or diss** – a gestural put-down or dismissal, meant to humiliate the opponent. They are often vulgar fighting moves that come from rocking. For example the cock rock (an open hand from ones own crotch to the opponent’s face) means ‘eat my dick’.

**Crew** – a group affiliation and support system. Crew members often practice moves together and compete together as a group.

**Cypher** – the area, generally circular and surrounded by onlookers, in which breaking takes place, either freestyle jamming or the battle.

**Downrocking** – floorwork that includes both footwork (such as the 6-step) and power moves (such as the swipe, windmill, and flare). It encompasses all moves performed with hands, arms, or a part of the torso in contact with the floor.

**Electric Boogaloo or popping** – the continuous flexing and release of isolated muscle groups in time with the beat. Electric Boogaloo is also the name of the first group that performed this dance.

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**Electric Boogie** – funk dance as appropriated by East coast youth via *Soul Train* and other media sources in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

**Freestyle** – improvisation based on a set of movements within a particular style.

**Freeze** – a moment of absolute stillness, generally a final punctuation to a movement phrase done for emphasis and to demonstrate control.

**Footwork** – the classic footwork step is the ‘six-step’. Beginning in a squat, the feet touch down in a circular pattern in six spots, legs extended when at the back, torso supported when necessary by hands on the ground. Done quickly, with momentum, it looks like a crab with fast-moving legs under a tranquil body. A variation on the six-step is the ‘four-step,’ which replaces two of the six steps with a kick in the air with one foot. Other tricks that can be played with the feet include the ‘c-c’, (one foot extended while the other knee swivels over the leg); a two foot kick from a squat position; and a play with one foot against the other knee and rotation on torso axis.

**Foundations** – ‘old school’ breaking technique based on the upright footwork, the downrock and simple spins and swipes.

**Funk Styles** – West Coast styles such as locking and popping (or electric boogaloo), developed in the early 1970s and exported via TV shows like *Soul Train*.

**Hip hop dance** – or ‘music video hip hop’ or ‘new school hip hop’, more commercial, frontal, heavily influenced by jazz dance technique and is often a fusion of other street dance forms

**House** – House is a freestyle dance that began in the late 1980s in NYC. It is a mixture of many influences including breaking, capoeira, hip hop, jazz and tap with an emphasis on footwork.

**Krumping and Clowning** – Krumping is an evolution of the Clowning style, both developed in South Central Los Angeles in the nineties. Clown Dancing was created by Thomas Johnson aka Tommy the Clown who fused elements of the ‘G dance’ or ‘Gangsta(er) boogie’, stripper dancing, Jamaican Dancehall moves such as the "butterfly" or the "rodeo", as well as elements from popping and locking.

**Locking** – A west-coast dance style invented in 1969 by Don Campbell, who modified the controlled hydraulic movements of ‘The Robot’ and mixed it with looser tap-inspired movement. The body moves in and out of control while snaps into certain positions.

**New School** – any hip hop dance form created as of the 1980s such as New Jack Swing and house dance.

**Old School** – any dance form associated with hip hop culture created before the 1980s such as locking, popping (or electric boogaloo) and breaking.

**Original generation (OG)** – early dancers of old school hip hop dances, including members of crews such as RSC, NYC Breakers, the Lockers, the Electric Boogaloos.

**Power moves** – spinning moves that use centrifugal motion of the entire body while on or close to the floor. The ‘1990’ is a spinning handstand. The ‘helicopter’ is a three-person move where one person acts as the axis spinning two others attached near the shoulders like propellers. In the windmill, The breaker rolls his torso continuously in a circular path on the floor, across the upper chest/shoulders/back, while twirling his legs in a V-shape through the air. In a flare, The breaker supports his body with his arms, swings his legs around his stationary torso in continuous circles, and never allows the legs to touch the ground.

**Rocking (uprocking, toprocking)** – the upright part of breaking which focuses on fast footwork and gestural movement. The basic uprock, called the ‘Indian step’, is a side-to-side step with the arms swinging. The ‘Charlie Chase’ is a forward moving step not unlike the Charleston. The ‘Brooklyn rock’ is a more aggressive and cardiovascular movement as the arms and one leg jut forward and back as the torso hops successively downward into a squat.

**Street dance** – a dance created and originally danced outside of dance institutions but in urban settings, either on city streets, parks, schoolyards or in dance clubs.

**Voguing** – this style has its origins in the mid-1960s black transvestite balls in New York City. In the 1970s dance and movement became more integral parts of the gay clubbing scene, so that it became an actual dance, based on striking fashion poses.